



4th Sunday of Easter Civ
Excerpts from Acts 13, Revelation 7 & John 10

Vindication

The Resurrection gave the first followers of Jesus hope in their suffering that they would be vindicated. And it can do the same for us too.
Fr David King – 8th May 2022

Please take some time with the Second Reading before looking at this (Apocalypse 7.9,14-17)

1. Reformation

I've just finished a novel, which was absolutely brilliant, though it was quite difficult to read in places. It is set in the Deep South of the United States, back in the 1960's. It opens with this 14-year-old African-American boy called Noah from a very poor family, who is trying to hitch a ride to school. His family have no money for the bus, and the school is miles away.

- A guy stops to give him a ride, so Noah jumps in. But little does he know that the driver is a wanted criminal and the police are on the lookout for him. And when they get stopped by the police, Noah gets arrested too, as an accomplice, even though he's only 14 years-old and had nothing to do with all this. But because the system is so corrupt and because nobody listens to him, and because there's so much prejudice against African-Americans, Noah gets sent to a juvenile detention centre and he can't do a thing about it. There, his mood plummets as he is far from home and cut off from his family. But things just go from bad to worse.
- He soon clocks that this "reformation centre" is a complete hellhole. The staff are brutal and corrupt, often subjecting the boys to extreme corporal punishment and abuse. The boys receive no education, and are forced to survive on meagre amounts of food each day. But all of this happens behind closed doors and no-one on the outside knows what's going on. It's an awful situation.
- The saving grace of this experience is the friendships that the boys form with each other. They have to stick together to survive. But the reality is that even that is difficult because they are all so angry, and sometimes they can't help but lash out at each other out of sheer frustration.
- Eventually Noah just can't stand it, and one day, when an Inspector comes visiting, Noah makes a daring attempt to slip the inspector a letter he's written about what's really going on here. It's a hugely risky thing to do, if he's caught, his life would be on the line. As the reader this is a tense part of the book, you are desperate for him to succeed, and yet all the odds are stacked against him. He gives the inspector the letter, hidden in a newspaper, and for a moment you think he's succeeded, but...well, it's not quite as simple as that.
- The truth of it is, it's not a completely happy ending, it's more complex than that. But I didn't mind that, because in many ways that reflects the reality of life. Not everyone does see justice done. For every one heart warming story of justice that makes the news, there's got to be a thousand stories in which people *don't* see justice done. In which people are left feeling hurt, betrayed, and abused.

2. Revelation

- What can the scriptures say to us about this? About all the injustice we see in the world, and possibly have experienced? Well, the second reading is very useful to us in this respect, as it gives us a real insight into what the resurrection meant to the early church, the first followers of Jesus, who were facing huge injustice in their lives. So let's look at that, and see what it meant to them, so we can work out what it means for us. And as ever a bit of background is essential...
- To understand the second reading, we need to understand that as soon as Christianity began to grow and spread around the Mediterranean, the Romans embarked on this horrific persecution of Christians. Many followers of Jesus were being persecuted and killed. The emperor Nero was famous for commanding that Christians be tied to stakes, covered with pitch and tar, and then set light whilst still alive, at his garden parties, to be human candles for the entertainment of his guests (That's where the term 'Roman Candle' comes from if you like fireworks).
- And the Book of Revelation is a letter that John has written to the Christians of the seven major churches of the Mediterranean to encourage them to persevere and stay faithful to Jesus. But this isn't just any old letter. In the letter John is talking about a vision he's clearly had in his prayer. And in this vision, it's almost as if the curtain has been pulled back for a moment, and John has seen into heaven, past the visible limits of this world, and he's seen where this is all headed.
- And in the second reading he describes how in this vision he sees those that have gone through this great persecution. The ones, he says, that have 'washed their robes clean in the blood of the lamb' (what a strange but beautiful phrase that is!). He sees them standing in front of God's throne. The risen Jesus has spread his protective cloak over them like a tent, and has wiped away every tear from their eye. What he sees is their victory and triumph, and their vindication!
- *This* is the difference the resurrection made to them! The resurrection enabled John and the early Christians *to see the trials of the present, in the light of history's final outcome* and the vindication and justice that the risen Jesus would bring. Essentially, the early Christians believed that God would do for them, what he did for Jesus; vindicate the one who suffered unjustly.

3. Restoration

- So what does this mean for us? Well, trusting in Jesus *does not mean* that everything will go our way. It *does not mean* that God owes it to us to smooth the way and keep it free of trials. It doesn't work like that. But it *does* enable us to trust in God's ultimate vindication. Not in the sense that 'God will get me vengeance in the end', but in the sense that justice will be done, that our righteousness will be seen and not forgotten in the new creation.
- Our faith should do exactly what it did for the first Christians, enable us to view the present in the light of history's final outcome. It means we can have a quiet confidence, knowing that whatever tragedies or miscarriages of justice come our way, the most important thing is to do what is right and trust in God's vindication.
- I'm not saying for a moment that we shouldn't work and fight for justice now, of course we should. But if it doesn't happen, as it often doesn't, it's ok, because God will vindicate the righteous man. So really, it comes back to the Gospel reading, for the most important thing is to follow the voice of the Shepherd knowing that, if we do, no-one will ever be able to steal us from him. So that's what today is about. The Resurrection gave the first followers of Jesus hope in their suffering that they would be vindicated. And it can absolutely do the same for us too.

Jesus, keep me faithful to you come what may, and keep me trusting in the justice you will bring to the world.