

Eastertide Sermon Series: Being Easter People 4th May 2008

No 6: Keeping the Faith—Secure in the Spirit

The last in the series—what, finally for now, shall we say about being Easter people?

You are being Easter people. You are at the end of a long line of other 'Easter people', who have had confidence in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. You are worshiping together, listening to the scriptures being read to you, singing spiritual songs, and receiving bread and wine, duly blessed, in remembrance of Jesus, who lived, died and was resurrected.

You are keeping the faith - every prayer, every act of willed love, every hymn sung, every communion received - might be described thus (cupped hands); *here, I am keeping the faith, with the rest of you.* Other hands are cupped: across the green in All Saints, in homes in secret, at the Vatican, amongst Quakers, at Amala, in new Zealand.

This is part of God's triumph, mentioned in John's gospel, that the faith *is kept* and, we trust, can never be extinguished till the end of time.

What else do these cupped hands represent ? That much/most faith originates in vulnerability - and only afterwards is there vindication. John's gospel uses the word **glory** to describe the result of vulnerability and vindication. Jesus death and his subsequent resurrection by the Father brings Glory: *'I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So, now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.*

Jesus is acting out the primary responsibility of every Christian, to undertake 'acts of willed love' (drinking with outcasts; allowing yourself to be killed for your beliefs). We do it because he did it first, and because that's the way the world works. I use the phrase 'willed love' to distinguish from the good things we do naturally—even from emotion—its not hard and fast—but there is a clear distinction, summed up in 'love thy neighbour as thyself'.

In modern times we remember particular Christians who have put their own existence at risk for the sake of God: Their 'acts of willed love', given time, are so often vindicated and God is glorified: Tutu, Mandela, Archbishop Oscar Romero. (We also need to hear other, less well known names, rather than relying on the most famous). The process has a stark and terrible beauty as we see a mechanism at the heart of the universe: vulnerability and vindication are part and parcel of keeping the faith - and there is no other security offered apart from life lived in the power of in the Spirit. (which can feel very insecure).

This is the staple of all great literature—the hero risks herself/himself, is rejected, but their stand (against inequality, evil) bears great fruit. The Christian gospel claims that this pattern is of God, and that it was most perfectly enacted in the life of the Trinity.

This, then is the task of Easter people. As Adela pointed out back at the beginning, the disciples received the strength to follow in Christ's footsteps by the power of the resurrection appearances. We also receive it through our experience of other Easter people we have grown up with, and by hearing the voice of God / (Christ—as Lorna pointed out) through the scriptures and through silent prayer.

Jonathan reminded us that we are required to proclaim Christ in word and deed to the world at large. Acts of willed love are what is

required of God's Easter people. And, in his second sermon, Jonathan reminded you that in the process we share the wounds of Christ. He bore ridicule and was misunderstood—so, sometimes should we.

We also bear the wounds when we stand alongside those in need, without answers, without immediate vindication, but also without cynicism and lost hope. (McCanns etc.) 'Holding crosses' can be symbolic of this. (*Story of the mum who came to church just a few days after the funeral for her stillborn child - I gave her a holding cross because it said more than words could, and affirmed divine love, even in such terrible circumstances*)

The filling of cupped hands is a joint effort, yours and God's. So here is the fresh challenge for you who would be Easter people who wish to keep the faith, secure in the Spirit:

- Worship regularly - it was the life blood of those disciples immediately following Jesus' ascension into heaven. It's your Christian lifeblood to - acts of love flow from it (read Acts)
- In silent prayer at the beginning of each day, ask God: show me the acts of willed love that you require of me
- Believe that God will vindicate (resurrect) your act of love, however minor you believe it to be, and however long it takes (*Story of mum who sought me out to take a funeral because she had known me through an assembly I'd done years back*)
- Trust that the holy, heavenly Trinity is on your side and by your side. That Jesus prays for you, that the Father stands ready to glorify you, and that the Spirit will guide you from this moment onwards.

Postscript, not used on Sunday

Remember, so often you have been on the receiving end of acts of willed love - your lives have been and are being healed by God's glory working through others. Because Easter people are as needy as the rest of those who live in God's broken and beautiful creation.

Revd Nick Whitehead