

Easter 6.08

During the Easter season there is a change in the church's reading schedule. Normally the first reading for the Sunday Mass is taken from the Old Testament, but during Easter time we read from the New Testament book called the Acts of the Apostles, which scripture scholars believe to have been written by the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke. Thus they believe that Luke wrote a two-volume work, the first being his Gospel, the second the Acts. This second work tells the story of the beginning of the Church. And today we read about the first community's first expansion. Philip leaves Jerusalem to go to Samaria. In itself his move is somewhat remarkable because, as the 4th chapter of John's Gospel tells us, the Jews used nothing in common with the Samaritans. On the other hand, there is a precedent here for his move because Jesus himself ventured into Samaritan territory and even asked a Samaritan woman to give him a drink from her water bucket. He was willing to share something with her. Now Philip preaches the risen Jesus to them, and because his preaching is accompanied by miracles, many of them become followers of Jesus. And when the first community in Jerusalem hears about Philip's success, it sends Peter and John to confirm his work. Note that while Philip baptizes, it is Peter and John's privilege to be able to bring the

Holy Spirit upon the new converts, a fact which does two things at once: it confirms the link between this new community and the founding community, and it confirms the authority of the first community's leaders. But perhaps for us one important lesson to be learned from this reading is the fact that the preaching of this new faith was accompanied by signs and miracles.

Someone said to me recently that he found it absolutely understandable that the Church's preaching should be accompanied by signs and miracles, because if God can become human, if the infinite can squeeze itself into the confines of one human person, then anything is possible. Therefore a faith which claims that this miracle of God becoming human has in fact taken place in Jesus ought to expect that its preaching will be accompanied by signs and wonder, by miracles.

Our readings and our liturgical prayers during the Easter season bear witness to this kind of belief in miracles. They keep telling us that though our Lord's resurrection the whole world has been renewed, re-created, remade, and we human are once again made whole. To be truthful, at times when I pray these prayers, the memory of what I have seen on television or in a magazine or heard on the radio returns to me and causes me to ask questions:

How can we say that our broken world and we are once again made whole? Where is the evidence to back up that claim? When we look around, what do we see? War, war, war. Human history, even here in the Christianized part of the world, is almost entirely the story of war and conquests. What else do we see? All sorts of violence and torture, and people suffering from hunger and disease, people suffering from injustice, people suffering from loneliness and abandonment. Isn't the church much closer to the truth, to reality, when in its prayers it describes our world and our life in it as an exile in a valley of tears? Where, then, is the new world of the risen one, the world in which sin has been conquered and human beings have become whole?

The first and obvious answer must be that we should look for this new world in the Church. Here the light should begin to shine, and, to a certain extent, I think it does, though not completely. And that is also true to the facts of our faith because while our faith teaches us that the world is renewed and saved, it also teaches us that this salvation is a work in process both personally in each of us and in the world at large, in human history. The Kingdom of God is among us, but the enemy has not yet been completely conquered.

There are two playing fields on which this struggle between the Kingdoms of Light and Darkness take place. One is the field of our individual lives, the other is the field of public life. Two fields, yes, but they are not separate from each other. Our job is to cooperate with the Holy Spirit as he attempts to make our personal lives holy. When we do so, we will find that this same Spirit is leading us to contribute to making our world a place of light. None of us leads a purely private life, but many of us feel that we are small people who cannot do much to change the larger world around us. But we can, and we do so by offering it the example of our good lives. Let us listen to that opening sentence of today's second reading again: "Beloved, sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts." So that is speaking of our personal lives. But then the letter continues: "Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for the reason for your hope." If we are living lives of faith and hope and love, people who have no hope will ask us how we do it. Then we should tell them. And we should do so gently and respectfully. And if such witness, even when given gently and reverently, leads to suffering, we must bear it, for then we, like the Lord, will be suffering for doing what is good and not for what is bad.

But the miracles which should accompany our preaching—where are they? They are our lives lived in faith, hope and love. These are the primary miracles which Christian preaching can offer to the world. You remember the story about the deacon Lawrence who was told by the Roman authorities to hand over the treasures of the Church to the government. Lawrence collected all the poor the church helped and brought them to the governor: Here are our treasures, he told the governor.

When the church today is asked to exhibit the miracles which should accompany its preaching, it can and must point to the lives of its saints and say: here are our miracles. It can point to a Mother Teresa. But let us hope it can also point to our lives as giving the same witness, even if in a more modest way.