

3rd SUNDAY OF EASTER

Recently a Chinese Catholic described to a group on retreat how she had copied out the gospels from an old Bible. She wanted to know them more deeply and to have a text to share with other Christians or people interested in Christianity.

The Bible had belonged to her grandmother, who had kept it hidden from the authorities for almost fifty years. At the time of the Cultural Revolution of the 1960's she was sure that it would be found and that she would be sent to a prison camp.

The story reminds us of the early monks like Eadfrith who copied out the gospels in Britain during the Dark Ages. Particular letters were illuminated by paint and fine artwork was included. The wonderful Book of Kels in Dublin and the Lindisfarne Gospels show the work of the Celtic monks.

Like those monks, the persecuted Christians of China witness that Christ is risen from the dead. They are part of a great river of people through the ages who have celebrated Easter. Three weeks ago the paschal candle was lit from the fire in churches throughout the world. Among small groups of Christians gathering in China, at Masses in London or New York or Mount Eliza, at celebrations in small barrios in Latin America and at rich cathedrals in Europe the same message was proclaimed.

It is difficult to imagine the fear of the first disciples after the death of Jesus. They had fled from the cross; only the women had remained there in prayer. Then the disciples walking to Emmaus met a stranger who explained the meaning of the Gospel to them. As soon as they recognized him as Jesus he vanished from their sight. The others found it difficult to believe that Christ had risen from the dead. His appearance, described in today's Gospel frightened them at first. It is difficult to explain why. Perhaps a meeting with God always involves fear or awe.

By describing Jesus eating with his disciples, Luke shows his readers that he was not a ghost. Christ had been raised from the dead in his totality. The Body of Jesus was transformed, but they could still recognise him. After this meeting, the apostles knew that they had to preach the good news of the resurrection, even if it led to persecution or martyrdom.

The disciples were transformed by the presence of the risen Christ. They became able to face opposition, to proclaim that Jesus had been raised

from the dead. Peter was able to face crucifixion. Stephen was prepared to be stoned to death. Today, some Christians suffer imprisonment for their faith, and even in our own society Catholics are often seen as a little odd. People in the health profession can experience discrimination or feel compromised for asserting the value of human life. There are many ways in which loyalty to the faith can lead to suffering – from speaking out about an injustice at work to telling a truth that is painful.

Peter, in his preaching in Jerusalem, called upon those who caused the death of Jesus to repent. We usually associate repentance with the season of Lent, but it is something which is constantly needed. The saints witness to the fact that as people grow in holiness, they become more aware of the need of God's mercy and forgiveness.

Each Christian is called to be a witness to the Resurrection. For some, this happens in daily life as they bring their faith to bear on the situations they meet. Telling the truth, being honest, standing up for the weak; all are ways of witnessing to the faith. Perhaps one of the greatest witnesses is joining the Christian community each weekend to celebrate the Eucharist. This strengthens the faith of all present

Some are called to witness in more dramatic ways. Let us not forget the Chinese Catholics and others whose faith has to be secret and may be the cause of persecution.

The promise of the scriptures is that God is present in his Church until the end of time. Whatever difficulties may arise, God will not abandon his people.