

## FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK



DIVINE MERCY SUNDAY – April 23, 2006 B

### RESPONDING TO QUESTIONS ABOUT THE RESURRECTION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR LIVES

In July '04, the editors of *U.S. Catholic* interviewed Anglican Bishop N.T. Wright of Durham, England. These are some of the questions and answers from the interview:

#### **Did the disciples expect Jesus to rise from the dead?**

Absolutely not. When Jesus said to the disciples: "We're going up to Jerusalem and the Son of Man is to be executed and on the third day be raised." I think they're scratching their heads saying, "We don't know what he's talking about. Obviously he doesn't mean literal death because whoever heard of a Messiah who dies?" As far as they're concerned, the resurrection is the big thing that's going to happen at the end of the world. Jesus, however, seems to be describing a Resurrection that would happen only to him. That's just not on their radar screen.

Think of the road to Emmaus where Jesus says to the two disciples, "Don't you realize this is how it had to be?" The only way they can realize it is by having another trip right through the Old Testament to see the pattern of suffering and vindication woven all the way through. Then they realize this had to happen even to the Messiah. Nobody had dreamed of that.

#### **What was the significance of Jesus' Resurrection for his disciples?**

The first thing the Resurrection meant was that Jesus really was the Messiah. *Messiah* is not a specifically divine title—it really means he was the one in whom Israel's destiny and God's purpose for Israel were summed up.

Second, if he really was the Messiah, then somehow his death must have been a victory, not a defeat. It must have been a saving event. I mean, a crucified Messiah would normally have been very bad news.

And third, since he is the Messiah and since his death was a saving event and not a disaster, then therefore he is now constituted as the Lord of the whole world.

This is a deeply Jewish belief found in Psalms 2 and 89 and many other places: that when the Messiah comes, he will be the one to rule the nations. The early

Christians didn't give up on this Jewish belief, they just said that now the Messiah's rule will be shaped and defined by the cross and Resurrection. So the early Christians redefined power and redefined empire, and that gave them a peculiar and previously undreamed of mission.

Now think of what I haven't said. I haven't mentioned forgiveness of sins. I haven't said, "The Resurrection means that we go to heaven when we die."

People today sometimes talk about Easter as if the great message is that there really is life after death after all. That's a very modern perception, which would occur only to somebody who had been brought up with the secularist denials of life after death. If that's where you're starting from, Easter is still good news.

But for the early Christians, that was not their issue. They knew if they were God's people they would be raised from the dead. For them the issue was, is Jesus the Messiah or is he not? Had God's kingdom been decisively launched or hadn't it? The answer was yes, he was, and yes, it had; and here we go.

The dominant note in the early Christian worldview was joy, because something has happened as a result of which the world really is a different place. They're living out of that; they don't really care if they get put in prison or beaten up or whatever because some thing has happened that now determined who they are.

#### **How should our belief in the Resurrection affect our reaction when someone we love dies?**

In Britain, there is a reading that has become enormously popular with people planning funerals. It goes something like: "Death is nothing at all. I have just slipped away into the next room. Think of me, speak to me just as you always did. I'm just close by. All is well," etc. Many people think that because it seems to be comforting in a time of grief, this must be a good and Christian thing. *In fact, it is profoundly unchristian.*

The Christian faith is about facing the reality of evil, the reality of death, the reality of pain, of loss. Then we name it as a beaten enemy, and we claim the defeat of death by the Resurrection of Jesus as the ground for future hope. That gives us a much more robust way into a proper grief process than the denial

of saying, “I shouldn’t grieve because this person went to heaven.”

Sometimes we even misinterpret what job it is that the Resurrection gave us. We think our job is telling other people they’re going to have a ticket to heaven, too. Whereas the real job presented to us by the New Testament is much tougher than that.

### **And it is?**

Implementing “on earth as it is in heaven.” At the end of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus says, “All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me.” If you believe that, it means that Jesus is actually in authority over Great Britain and the European Union and North America and Saudi Arabia and Africa and everywhere else. What does that mean?

Our clue is in what Jesus says next, “Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” The way to implement Jesus’ authority is to make disciples.

Now because we are so attuned to the dangers of triumphalism, we fear what that vision asks of us. The fear of triumphalism can scare us into making Christianity just a private spiritual option. That really isn’t the New Testament’s vision. The new project that begins at Easter is very open-ended and it depends on us.

### **So how do we recognize when Christians are succeeding at the job that Easter gave us?**

Since I became a bishop, I’ve visited a dozen projects in my diocese that nearly make me weep when I see them because I think they’re an example of what you’re asking.

There’s a really rough area in Gateshead, which is very socially deprived. Ten years ago a priest at St. Chad’s Church in Gateshead realized that many of the children in the area were quite literally out on the street from morning til night. This priest bullied and harried the church and raised enough money to start a children’s project right beside the church. It’s become a place of enjoyment and education and security, where children can come after school and stay until their mothers get home.

I could name half a dozen places like this that offer child care, literacy classes, job training, credit unions. The people say, “Nobody told us to do this, but as we were praying about it and celebrating the Eucharist, we found we had to do something about these problems. We knocked on a few doors and to our surprise they opened.” I can just see resurrection happening in these communities. It’s hugely powerful.

### **You’ve said that the Resurrection is an event with political consequences. What does that mean?**

Let me begin by saying that when people talk about politics in the Western world, we always fall into a spectrum of political opinion, the basic left and right. At one end of the spectrum you’re in favor of strong government, the “powers that be” being very powerful and everyone obeying and not revolting. At the other end, you’ve basically got anarchy. Whenever you talk about the political implications of the gospel, people assume you’re going toward the left end of the spectrum. We need to move beyond this.

It seems to me that the church needs to develop a more robust theology of how to critique the powers that be without collapsing into the trivial life-wing end of the spectrum. And we need to affirm the fact that God wants there to be authority without collapsing into the trivial, should-shrugging right-winged end of the spectrum.

Remember that the Messiah of Israel is supposed to be the Lord of the whole world. Other power structures are OK, but they need to know that they are not divine. In Romans 8, Paul says that the powers that be are ordained by God and that Christians should submit to them. It would have been news to Caesar—if he ever read Romans, which he didn’t—that he was there because the Jewish God put him there.

You see the same when Jesus stands before Pilate. Pilate says, “Don’t you realize that I have the power to have you killed or released?” Jesus says, “You couldn’t have any power over me unless it were given to you from above.”

God wants there to be power structures, otherwise the bullies will always win. If you take away all constraint, all law, it’s only five minutes before someone says, “Whoopee, I can go rob that little old lady in the next street because nobody will stop me.”

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Have a blessed week,

