

## The Resurrection

### Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> April 2020

It's hard to feel that we have now arrived at Easter. Lockdown still continues, the financial burdens of this crisis are increasingly affecting peoples jobs and livelihoods, the frustration of not being able to see loved ones is causing a great deal of hurt and sadly the numbers of those with Covid-19 seem so large that it's easy to forget that behind each number is a person.

I would like to share something that has given me a lot of hope at the moment because it expresses artistically something that is concrete, real and true. It's an Icon known as '*The descent into Hell*'. I have this image on display in the presbytery oratory at the moment because it draws me into the beautiful mystery of the Lord's Resurrection. (For those who cannot see the Icon please visit the parish website)



The first thing you notice is the person of Our Lord. He stands out, not only because he is at the very centre of the Icon but also because of his brilliant white clothing and his posture of power and strength. The blue almond shape behind him, known as a mandorla, also emphasises his importance and centrality to all that is taking place in the scene. It is right and proper that Jesus is at the very centre of this Icon for he should be the very centre of our lives. St John reminds us why at the start of his Gospel.

*'In the beginning was the Word (Jesus),  
the Word (Jesus) was with God,  
and the Word (Jesus) was God.  
He was with God in the beginning.  
Through him all things came to be,  
not one thing had its being but through him.'* (Jn 1:1-3)

Everything that exists, moves, lives, breathes, is moulded and formed owes its creation to Jesus, the Word of God. The Iconographer is reminding us in this image that we can't push Jesus to one side, bring him out of his box at Christmas and Easter when it suits us, follow him when and how we feel like it. No. Every thought, decision, word and action we make must be in relation to Jesus. To be a Catholic is to walk in his footsteps, to imitate him, to become another Christ to the world around us so that, as St. John quotes the Lord:

*'...They may have life and have it to the full.'* (Jn 10:10b)

The mandorla, the blue almond shape, behind the Risen Lord represents the Glory of God. Jesus was not just a nice, kind and polite person. He wasn't just a good human being who had some wise teachings. No, No, No. The mandorla reminds us that Jesus was fully God and fully human. He is one person, fully divine and fully human. In his brilliant white clothing he is showing us that he, God, has truly risen not symbolically or metaphorically but that he has truly destroyed the eternal power of death. The new creation has begun. Eden, that paradise that was once lost by Adam is now being restored and made new by Christ, the new Adam.

Death attempts to pervade this Icon. It is hard not to be struck by the pitch black flooring of Hades at the bottom of the picture, the two stone coffins and the jagged rocks at either side creating the sense that the viewer is looking into a deep and formidable cavern, a tomb.

*'Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting? Now the sting of death is sin and sin gets its power from the Law. So let us thank God for giving us the victory through Our lord Jesus Christ.'* (1 Cor 15:55-57)

Death maybe trying to enter this Icon but as St. Paul reminds us in his letter to the Corinthians, Jesus has destroyed the power of death – *'Death, where is your*

*victory?'* We see this victory under Our Lord's feet. Those bronze rectangular objects depict the doors of Hell. The Risen Christ has kicked them wide open. How? Well look closely at how the doors have fallen – in the shape of the Cross. Through that great gift of love on Calvary, where Jesus laid down his very life for us victory was gained. The Lord sacrificed his very life for us who are saints and sinners. For us who are cold and unfeeling. For us who are selfish and nasty. For us who judge, criticise and gossip about others. For us who nurse grudges and bitterness. For us who do not forgive, are impatient and cruel. For us who are full of our own self importance, lack genuine humility and worship ourselves rather than the true God. Despite all these flaws and failings Jesus gladly went to the Cross to forgive us all these weaknesses, take them upon himself so that one day we too would die to this life and rise again with him to new and eternal life.

The man and woman that Jesus is lifting up from the two coffins are Adam and Eve. Through their disobedience, their full and free willingness to stop listening to God and follow the devil, they have brought the disease of sin and death into the world. From the black flooring of the Icon, these two figures are raised up towards the central light of the picture – Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life. Covering the black floor are numerous keys, locks and chains which are now all busted, unlocked and smashed. Nothing can bar us from Jesus. At every graveside and at every crematorium, what gives the believer hope is that they will be reunited with the Lord.

*‘“I am the Resurrection and the life.” It is Jesus himself who on the last day will raise up those who have believed in him, who have eaten his body and drunk his blood.’*

(Catechism of the Catholic Church #994.)

Notice the people around Our Lord. On his right above Adam is John the Baptist. That brave man who stood out from the crowd, who did not conform to how the rest of the world thought you should act or think. That courageous prophet who did not cling to earthly values but to the hope of a Saviour sent by God to restore the broken world and its damaged relationship with God.

*‘...And so it was that John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.’ (Mk 1:4)*

John the Baptist sees in this Icon that his preaching was not for nothing. Here he sees God's hope made real, the Saviour Jesus Christ, the destroyer of Hell and the giver of true life to all believers. At the end of the lockdown maybe we too could heed John the Baptist and repent and come closer to God. Come back to Confession, the Sacrament that he established, and hear him forgive us, heal us

and give us new life in the grace of his love. Pray for those who do not use his gift of Confession because they remain in the darkness of the tomb.

And finally who are the other two men? From their heads you can tell that they are kings. King David and King Solomon.

***'But over the House of David and the citizens of Jerusalem I will pour out a spirit of kindness and prayer. They will look on the one whom they have pierced; they will mourn for him as for an only son, and weep for him as a people weep for a first born child.'*** (Zech 12:10)

God had promised King David that his dynasty would last forever and as we know this promise was fulfilled because God always keeps his promises. Jesus, through Saint Joseph's guardianship was of the House of David. Here the king sees the true and rightful heir of the kingdom conquering the enemy, the devil. The kingdom that Jesus the victor is establishing is not an earthly political realm but the everlasting Kingdom of God rooted in truth, mercy, justice, peace and real love. Like John the Baptist, King David witnesses God's promise fulfilled.

King Solomon, known for his wisdom, witnesses something said by the Lord to his disciples in the Gospel.

***'On Judgement day the Queen of the South will rise up with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and there is something greater than Solomon here.'*** (Mt 12:42)

The Queen of the South is more familiar to us as the Queen of Sheba, especially after the 1959 Hollywood film '*Solomon and Sheba*', starring Yul Brynner. She travelled a huge distance to meet King Solomon because his God given wisdom was world renowned. The Lord told the disciples that there was someone greater than Solomon before them – Himself, Jesus. The Lord is God's wisdom personified. He is Wisdom and Truth. Throughout history humankind has been seeking and searching for the answers to the great questions of life. The answers to those questions will always be found in Jesus Christ. How many of us look elsewhere for solutions to problems or turn to ourselves in times of crisis? Let's follow the example of the Queen of Sheba and turn to the Lord instead. Let us pray and ask him for help, for guidance and wisdom. King Solomon the wise continues to impart wisdom upon us by pointing to Christ in the Icon and saying quite simply 'Behold Truth Himself.'

Keep praying, keep hoping, keep trusting and keep believing in the Risen Jesus.

God Bless

Fr. O'Brien