

Easter Sunday  
(Acts 10:34.37-43 / John 20:1-9)  
16.04.2017

On this Easter morning I will reflect for just a few short moments on one particular aspect of the resurrection gospel story which, like the seamless garment mentioned in John's passion narrative, is peculiar to John's account of events: namely, **Jesus' burial clothes left in the tomb** – and more specifically the detail about the way in which they were neatly folded.

At the end of John's account of Jesus' passion we are told how *Nicodemus brought about one hundred pounds of ointment – a mixture of aloes and myrrh – with which to anoint Christ's body. Joseph of Arimathaea then wrapped the body in linen cloths, following the Jewish burial custom.*

A word about the custom referred to here.

It was customary to *bind* dead bodies in linen wrappings.

We may remember from the story of Lazarus being brought back to life after four days in the tomb how Jesus instructed those looking on to unbind the raised man so that he might walk free.

In light of this, while not wanting to speculate too much, proffering all kinds of imaginary explanations around the discarded grave clothes of the Risen Jesus, **I think it fair to understand the evangelist's mention of Jesus' discarded grave clothes as pointing us in the direction of the Risen Lord's new-found freedom.**

I believe the thing to grasp is that, risen from the dead, Jesus is now even freer to act in our world than hitherto His death and resurrection.

**By extension, I think it fair to see the detail of Jesus' discarded grave clothes as an invitation for us to reflect on our new found liberty in Christ.**

By Jesus' victory over death, we are all of us set free to live our lives fully. Thanks to our participation in the mystery of Jesus' resurrection we have been liberated to live our lives in an unhindered way, in the freedom of the children of God.

The gospel account tells us that **Jesus' grave clothes were folded and neatly arranged.** I am inclined to think of this detail as **a hint that true freedom is found in perfect order.**

Let me tease out that thought a little more.

While we all long to be free, we have to realise that **true freedom comes at a price and carries with it real responsibilities.**

There is a joke that makes this point. It runs thus: *Absolute freedom is being able to do what you please without considering anyone except your spouse and your kids, your company and your boss, your neighbours and your friends, the police, the government, the doctor and for good measure the Church!*

Clearly, **there are parameters to absolute freedom.**

What is being conveyed to us by that *tongue in cheek* story is that freedom cannot be achieved outside of the Law; it must be lived within limits. **Freedom is found in a well-ordered life.**

Our story further underlines that **attention to other people and respect for them** (which is what observance of the law guarantees) **actively generates and maintains freedom.**

The longest psalm in the Psalter – that collection of ancient prayers of God's People – is psalm 119 (118 in the Greek numbering). This long psalm makes the point over and over

again that **real freedom, true life, is found in observance of the Torah and respect for its precepts.** In verses 44-45 of that psalm we read: *So shall I keep your precepts forever and forever, free within the limits of your Law.*

Again I insist that the point to be grasped is that the law – good order in our lives – promotes and safeguards freedom.

We know from experience that when our lives get into a mess we are not free.

The epistle of James speaks precisely of *the law of freedom.*

Again and again the Bible teaches that true freedom is found in a well-ordered life; it is certainly not found in chaos, nor does it create chaos.

John's gospel draws to our attention that **Jesus found perfect freedom in obedience.**

If John's passion narrative depicts Jesus as sovereignly free, it shows us how He was totally submitted to the Father's will – submitted meaning literally *in mission under ...* Christ was in mission under God.

Jesus tells us that He is ever ready to do accomplish His Father's desire. Jesus is shown in the gospels to have been sent to set us free from slavery to the bondage of sin and all other forms of enslavement in our lives – all of which are rooted in our disordered self-will.

Perhaps our greatest slavery in life is enslavement to our false self.

All this leads me to say that I see **Jesus' having set aside His grave clothes as an invitation to set aside all that holds us bound, restricting our freedom** – in the dark tomb regions of our present lives.

**The man Jesus, now risen from the dead, is Christ without limits.** He has been set free from all that could have held Him back – the restricting grave linens in which His body was wrapped, holding Him bound in the grips of death in that dark tomb wherein they laid His crucified body.

In the words of Archbishop Rowan Williams *Jesus has been set free from all that holds back the growth of humanity towards God.*

For me those words make it clear that the fact that Jesus discarded His grave clothes affects all of us. Christ's new found freedom implies ours. It sets us free to grow in our humanity – which actually means to grow in our likeness to God.

**Made in God's own image and likeness we are all called not only to be like God, but to share in His own life. Participation in Christ's risen life is ours. The mystery we celebrate today is our having been raised to new life in God by the power of Christ's resurrection.**

We can hear Paul's words first addressed to the Colossians as addressed to us this morning: ***You have been raised to new life in Christ.***

This is the message we are called to take to heart and carry away from this celebration.

**We have been raised to new life in Christ.**

Words from George Herbert's poem *The Dawning* come to mind this Easter morn. I share them with you as the last words of this meditation, in the hope that they may be both an encouragement and a comfort: ***Awake ... Christ's resurrection thine may be.***

Amen!