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(Letter n°53)

“If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.”
(Rm 8:11)

During Easter, we suggest you reflect on an extract from a book by Alister McGrath, an Anglican priest and theologian originally from Northern Ireland and today an Oxford professor.

By reading the Gospels closely and attentively, we can grasp something of the life-changing astonishment that the events created within the circle of those first Christians. Their minds and imaginations were forced to expand and their horizons to be raised while they tried to take in the magnitude of this undeniable and great new work of God. As we have seen, Mary Magdalene and Thomas the Twin were transformed in their ways of thinking and their outlooks on life. But what about the other disciples? What, for example, about Peter?

In subtly different ways, the four Gospels portray Peter as the leader of the first Christians, the spokesperson for the disciples as they followed Jesus of Nazareth and tried to make sense of his identity and significance. In the aftermath of the resurrection, the disciples looked to Peter as the era of the Christian Church dawned. So how did Christ's rising from the dead make an impact on his personal world?

As a historian, I have often noticed how new religious and political movements often try to portray their chief figures in the best possible light. The failings and weaknesses that are so characteristic of human nature are often airbrushed out of the picture. Yet the Gospels portray Peter as a thoroughly human character, with reassuringly human strengths and weaknesses. This is perhaps most clearly seen in the moving account of Peter's failure in the courtyard of the High Priest in Jerusalem. After the Last Supper, as Jesus walked towards the Mount of Olives with his disciples, he spoke to them darkly about what was about to happen. They would all abandon him (Mark 14.27-28). There was no trace of anger in his words. He was simply telling them what the future held.

*Peter, however, was outraged at such a suggestion. Others among the disciples might desert Jesus (did he look around him, accusingly, at this point?) – but *he* would never, ever do such a thing. Nobody could doubt Peter's commitment to his Lord, nor his belief that, when the going got tough, he would rise to this challenge. Yet Jesus knew otherwise. The spirit might be willing; the flesh,*

however, was weak. How many aspirations have been shattered through a failure to be realistic about the limitations of human nature?

Gently, kindly, Jesus explained that Peter hardly knew himself or the challenges he would face. Peter would deny Jesus, not merely once, but three times before the cock crowed twice. (The reference here is probably to the Roman military trumpet call sounded during the night to mark the beginning of the fourth watch at 3 a.m.) It was a thought that Peter could not bear: even if he had to die for doing so, he would never deny Jesus (Mark 14.29-31).

We shake our heads wisely as we read these words, knowing how things will actually work out. Yet Peter deserves to be understood here rather than censured. His motives were bold and true. What he had yet to confront was the weakness of his own nature which, when put to the test, failed him. After the arrest of Christ, Peter stood in the courtyard of the High Priest, warming his hands over a charcoal fire. His first challenge came from someone who could hardly be regarded as a powerful, dangerous opponent – a servant girl: 'Weren't you one of those with Jesus, the man from Nazareth?' Her question probably arose from nothing more than idle curiosity. Yet even this innocent question proved too much for Peter. He vigorously denied any knowledge of Jesus.

Perhaps he protested too much. The servant girl wasn't satisfied with his answer. She turned to those standing around, expecting them to back her judgement; she eventually got some support from within the crowd. Clearly frightened, Peter twice more denied having any knowledge of Christ. At that point, the 'cock crowed for the second time'. Peter then realized what he had done. Not only had he failed Jesus, he had failed himself. He was humiliated in his own eyes. Little wonder that he broke down and wept (Mark 14.66-72). His situation seemed irredeemable.

Many of us have found ourselves in similar dark places. Our eyes need to be opened to our weaknesses and flaws. Why do so many find that a spectacular failure is often the gateway to personal transformation and renewal? One answer might be that it forces us to be honest about ourselves, destroying our comforting illusions about our nobility and integrity. Failure holds up a mirror and invites us to see ourselves as we really are. It forces us to be honest and to start all over again.

Yet in Peter's case, the situation seemed to lie beyond redemption. With the death of Christ the following day, the world was a grim and bleak place. Jesus was dead, and the chief of his disciples was a failure and a coward. There was nothing to alleviate the unremitting gloom of the moment. The most that Peter could do was show his respect for his dead Lord by visiting his tomb. Then came the astonishing events of that Easter morning...

(Resurrection, SPCK, 2007, p. 39-42)



- ⌘ On 27 November, we began the Advent season in the Anglican parish of Rostrevor.
- ⌘ From 28 November to 2 December, Fr Mark-Ephrem preached the community retreat for the Anglican Benedictine nuns at Malling (England).
- ⌘ On 2 December, Br Éric was at the Anglican cathedral in Downpatrick where he occupied his canon's stall for the installation of Rev John Auchmuty as a new canon.
- ⌘ From 2 to 6 December, Fr Abbot Richard Yeo, President of the English Benedictine Congregation, was on retreat with us.
- ⌘ On 5 December, Fr Mark-Ephrem was at Armagh Anglican cathedral for a meeting of the Chapter.

- ✠ On 12 December, the choir of St Colman's College Newry, under the direction of Sinead Frame, performed the Requiem by John Rutter (an English composer born in 1945). The money raised by the concert was given to a humanitarian organization in Newry which cares for young, terminally ill cancer patients.
- ✠ On 15 December, Fr Mark-Ephrem preached at Armagh Anglican cathedral.
- ✠ From 16 to 18 December, we had a visit from Br Laurent Salud Abila, a Filipino novice at the *Mother of the Redeemer* Monastery in the United States. On 25 March, we prayed especially for him on the day of his temporary profession.
- ✠ On 19 January, during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Rev Dr Richard Clutterbuck, a Methodist minister, preached during the Eucharist.
- ✠ From 22 to 28 January, Fr Mark-Ephrem was at the Abbey of Monte Oliveto (Italy) for a meeting of the Definitory.
- ✠ On 1st February, Rev Suzanne Cousins, an Anglican minister in Donegal (Ireland) began her noviciate as a secular oblate.
- ✠ On 4 February, Mrs Claire Dowds of Belfast also began her noviciate as a secular oblate.
- ✠ From 11 to 28 February, Fr Mark-Ephrem was on a visit to our brothers at the Holy Trinity Monastery in the United States. He was accompanied by Fr Abbot Charles-Eugène Galichet from the Abbey of Abu Gosh (Israel). Fr Mark-Ephrem made a return visit from 2 to 12 April.
- ✠ On 9 and 10 March, an inter-religious meeting (comprising Protestants, Catholics, members of the Orthodox Church, Jews and Muslims) took place at the « An Cuan » Centre in Rostrevor. A representative from each religion/denomination was invited to speak on the theme of welcoming and meeting one another. Fr Mark-Ephrem presented the Catholic position.
- ✠ From 10 March to 5 April, we were delighted to welcome Sr Siong, from the Grandchamp Community (Switzerland).
- ✠ From 17 to 19 March, we had a visit from Bishop Raymond Field, the Auxiliary Bishop of Dublin.
- ✠ On 26 March, we welcomed the community of the Little Sisters of Jesus (two from France and one from Japan) and an Anglican sister from the *Sisters of the Love of God* in Oxford.
- ✠ From 26 March to 3 April, Br Thierry was in *Westmont College* (United States) where he had been invited to meet the teaching staff and the students.
- ✠ On 30 March, Fr Mark-Ephrem took part in the General Assembly of the *Irish Council of Churches*.



Humble God,
dying in the pain
and despair
of a torturer's cross,
we glimpsed your glory then,
in speaking kind words
with common criminals,
in concern and forgiveness
for those who had put you to death.

Humble God,
rising in the quiet
and beauty
of a garden tomb,
we glimpsed your glory then,
in the emptiness of the tomb.
'He is not here! He is risen!'
in the astonishment and disbelief
as women ran to tell the story.

Humble God,
risen with us now
in the fragile miracles
of human life,
we glimpse your glory now,
in the love, laughter and beauty
we share with one another,
in the depths of humanity,
as we respond to the needs and suffering of our world.
Amen.

Clare McBeath