

THE RESURRECTION IN THE EASTER LITURGY¹

J. D. CRICHTON

ONE of the effects of the restoration of the Holy Week liturgy and in particular of the Easter Vigil has been to re-direct attention to the Resurrection and its place in the Christian life. It is undoubtedly a new-found emphasis that does not chime very easily with the meditation-on-the-dolorous-passion mentality that has been the tradition since the later Middle Ages. The two are not of course incompatible and the Passion must always have a central place in the life of the Christian *in via*. But the liturgy does very definitely teach us that the climax of Christ's redeeming work was not the Cross but the Resurrection and we are now faced with the task of re-incorporating it into our lives. For this at least two things are necessary: one is the rediscovery of what the New Testament has to say about the Resurrection and the other is to live it in and through the liturgy.

A word must be said about the New Testament material if only because it underlies the outlook of the liturgy. It may be divided for our purposes into three strata: the prophecies and accounts of the Resurrection in the Gospels, the earliest *kerygma* or proclamation of the Resurrection in Acts and the teaching of St Paul. We can do no more here than refer to the Gospel passages in which our Lord foretells his Passion and Resurrection, noting meanwhile that the Resurrection is always mentioned, and to the passages in Luke 24, 26, 27 which seem to have become already a 'theological' scheme: 'Ought not Christ to have suffered these things and so enter into his glory?' (and *cf.* verses 44-46). Here, as in Acts, we find the redemption set against its Old Testament foreshadowing and the death always associated with the Resurrection. The redemption, including Resurrection, was willed by God (Acts 2, 23), was in fact the divine plan for the salvation of mankind. Without elaborating the teaching, St Luke both in Acts (2, 38-41) and the Gospel (24, 47) indicates that the effect of death and Resurrection is acquired by man through preaching (*kerygma*), repentance and baptism.

It is St Paul however who is the *Doctor Resurrectionis* and every-

¹ The substance of a paper read to the Conference of Ecclesiastical Studies at Hull, 1957.

where throughout his writings we find the note of Christ's victorious Resurrection sounded, always in association with the Cross. We find passages like these: 'Jesus Christ was delivered up for our sins and rose again for our justification' (Rom. 4, 25); and 'Christ died for all, that they who live, may not now live to themselves but unto him who died for them and rose again' where the construction of the Greek sentence with its two participles 'having died and having risen', both governing 'for them', makes it clear that Christ's Resurrection was also salvific. If we add to these passages another such as that of Ephesians 2, 4-6, 'But God . . . even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together in Christ . . . and hath raised us up together (with him), and hath made us sit together in the heavenly places through Jesus Christ', we can see why in the early liturgies, as in our own to this day, the whole work of our redemption was taken in in one sweep, was thought of as the mystery of Christ, but the *whole* mystery whose effects, flowing from the death and the Resurrection, are by the liturgy made present to us here and now.

There is no question of depreciating the value of the redeeming death and everyone is in agreement with St Thomas when he says that Christ's death was the meritorious cause of our salvation. Nor yet on the other hand is there any question of separating the death from the Resurrection or vice versa. St Paul, and the Fathers, saw these two things and much more in a synthetic view and Canon Cerfaux well sums up the Pauline point of view: 'The Christian message proclaims salvation, which is a great divine intervention of which Christ is the instrument. God is author, Christ is "actor" and the different episodes of the divine action go from the death of Christ, through the Resurrection, the preaching of the Gospel, the resistance to Christ (including the persecutions) to the parousia and final victory. There is no question of putting the drama of the Cross on one side. . . . The same power of God was in action in the death of Christ and in his Resurrection; it is in action in the preaching of the Gospel, saving those that believe (Rom. 1, 16); it will come to its full power and effectiveness in the parousia. God saves through Christ from the work of the Cross up to the final consummation.'²

The late Père Yves de Montcheuil brings us even closer to the

2 *Le Christ dans la théologie de S. Paul*, p. 15 (Paris, 1954).

mind of St Paul and to the underlying mentality of the liturgy: 'When we meditate on the Passion and death of the Saviour it often happens that we think of it as an event at which we should stop. . . . But this is not exactly the Pauline scheme of things. The thought of the Apostle is much more synthetic. He does not separate the events even if it were only to establish the need to unite them later on. He sees them at once in their unity. We can say that he envisages the act of death as the necessary obverse of the Resurrection. The death of Christ is thought of less as "event" than as "mystery", and this mystery, which is unique, is at once the mystery of death and the mystery of resurrection and life. These two are correlatives: but it is *the glory and life which predominate and come first* because they are definitive, while the death is only temporary. But also and above all, while we usually follow the chronological order seeing first the death and then the resurrection, St Paul saw first the Risen Lord, and perceives the Cross *through* his glorified state.'³ This passage, it seems to me, not only gives with a great economy of words the mind of St Paul and the early Christians but without theological *arrière-pensée* provides a firm basis for the mystery-theology of the Casel school and in any case forms an indispensable clue to an understanding of the Holy Week liturgy. We may say that what the early Christians were conscious of in the liturgy was the whole Mystery of Christ in which his life, death, Resurrection, exaltation to glory and his victorious second coming were seen as present because *he* was present. There is much to show that the Resurrection itself was considered already as the exaltation, and the accounts of the institution of the Eucharist, as well as for instance the banquet parables, indicate very clearly the eschatological theme (*annuntiabitis mortem donec veniat*), which as Père de Montcheuil remarks was for the early Christians a subject for rejoicing and an event that was regarded as a triumph (*ibid.*).

Nor did all this remain external to them, merely as a doctrine or an object of contemplation. They knew that by Baptism and the Eucharist they were incorporated into their Risen Lord and part of the interpretation of the Pauline texts I have quoted and others too is that by his Resurrection Christ became the principle and source of the new life that is dispensed to us in Baptism and the Eucharist. In the Gelasian Sacramentary there is a long series

3 *Mélanges théologiques*, p. 34 (Paris, 1951).

of prayers for Paschaltide which take just this teaching for their theme. It was surely all this that was condensed by St Thomas into his teaching that the Resurrection is the efficient cause of our salvation. If to this we add St Paul's teaching about the Resurrection as the exemplary cause of ours (*cf.* I Cor. 15, 20 and Ephes. 2, 4-6 etc.), we have the datum of revelation that underlies St Thomas's doctrine and another theme of the Easter liturgy. Again, in Colossians 3, 1 ff. and Romans 6, 3 ff., we are told that the Christian life is very much the Resurrection life by which we should live.

There can be no doubt I think that this emphasis on the resurrection life of Christ which is dispensed to us in the liturgy and which we should translate into our daily life will, as the Holy Week liturgy once more becomes a part of the minds of modern Christians, bring a new note of confidence and a new sense of purpose that is often sadly lacking. Conformity to Christ in the humiliation of his Passion will always be there to counteract any tendency to cocksureness, but we do need to be reminded that Christ's redeeming work was a victory which was won through suffering and humiliation, through gentleness and love, but which did in fact issue into triumph. 'Fear not, I have overcome the world.'

I have space for but a brief note on St John who contributes more than any other New Testament writer to the Passover theme of the liturgy. It is in some ways but the same teaching put in another way, but with the important difference that by it we are linked to God's redeeming work throughout the Old Testament, and in any case it provides us with a clue to a deeper understanding of the liturgy and of the mystery of Christ. One of the leitmotifs of his Gospel is the coming forth of the Son from the Father and his going back to him—a going back to glory—by the bitter way of the Cross. This is the translation of the ancient Passover theme—now raised to an infinite potential beyond it—into the terms of the New Testament. It is the *Transitus Domini* that lies at the very heart of the Paschal liturgy. If to this we may add the heavenly liturgy of the Apocalypse where the Lamb is standing though slain, with all its splendour and the overtones of triumph and joy we have, I think, some picture of what the early Christians found in the liturgy and which in one way and another is still there. It was in fact the whole

mystery of Christ that they found there, the Lord who lived and died and now reigns triumphant, the Risen Lord, the source of the new life, the life-giving Bridegroom of the heavenly Jerusalem which is his Bride. This mystery was and is made present to us in Paschal liturgy in a special way, but it is present not as an inert thing but as the dynamic principle of the Church's strength and life, the force that draws her into ever closer union with her Lord and gathers to him through her all mankind whom he promised to draw to himself by the Cross, but as we see, by the exalted Cross, the Cross raised up in the glory of the Resurrection.

For the liturgy, the Passover theme has a threefold meaning. First, it is the Passover of the Old Testament which among other places is referred to in the second lesson of Good Friday and principally in the *Exsultet* of the Vigil, when the Passing-over of the Lord spelt destruction for the Egyptians and rescue and 'salvation' for the Israelites, a deliverance which, for all that it was on the material plane, was for a St Cyprian owed to the saving power of Christ's blood shed on the Cross so many hundreds of years later. Secondly, it is the Passing-over of the Lord Christ who passed from death to life, a Passover that is enacted in the *Sacrum Triduum* which begins on Maundy Thursday with the *Cena Domini*—the Supper of the Lord: 'Jesus knowing that his hour had come to pass (*transeat-metabe*) from this world and knowing that he had come out from the Father and was going (back) to him. . . .' (John 13, 1 and 3). . . . Thirdly, there is the Passover of the Church or the people of God who in and through Christ pass from death to life, to the new life of the Resurrection when they will live in a new order of existence (Rom. 6, 3ff.). This is accomplished precisely through a participation in the liturgical action and if there is a Baptism at the Vigil we know how vividly real this becomes. As Dr Th. Schnitzler, whom I am paraphrasing here, says⁴: This is the central mystery (or the heart of the mystery—*Kerngeheimnis*) of the Easter celebration . . . and the Church does not find here the full or complete *transitus* which will be accomplished only with the second coming of the Lord which will be the final Easter when with him we shall pass for ever from death to life, and from suffering to eternal glory.

4 *Die Feier der Heiligen Woche*, pp. 122, 123 (Paulinus Verlag, 2nd ed. 1957).

Against this background it is easier to see the true content of the Paschal liturgy. Unfortunately, it would take too long to consider each day of Holy Week to find its Paschal content. But it may be worth saying that there is a widely held view, which is very ancient, that the Paschal liturgy extending from Maundy Thursday to Easter Day itself is a unitary celebration of the one redeeming mystery of Christ—although not all liturgists accept this point of view. However, if we take the Passover scheme, it is possible and convincing to fit into it both Maundy Thursday and Good Friday which might otherwise seem to be completely separated and without intrinsic connection with Easter. We have already pointed out how Maundy Thursday inaugurates in the solemn words of our Lord the Passover theme of the Three Days which must be said to run uninterrupted until Sunday. Thursday in its own way is an anticipation of the full flowering of the Easter mystery. It has several specifically Paschal features: there is the blessing of the Holy Oils which we know from Hippolytus (c. 200) was done at the Vigil service itself in conjunction with Baptism and Confirmation; there was, as we read in the Gelasian Sacramentary, the reconciliation of sinners that took place on this day which was an anticipation of the fruits of the Paschal redeeming work; there are all the signs of joy, the white vestments, the ringing of the bells and the white covering of the altar-crucifix. The same could be said of the texts of the evening Mass also where the triumph of the Cross is set forth in the introit, and the offertory psalm, *Dextera Domini*, is that from which the joyous chant of Easter Day, the *Haec dies* no less, is taken.

If the Paschal mystery as celebrated on Maunday Thursday is overshadowed by the Cross to which it looks, Good Friday is permeated with the glory of the Resurrection. We remember the phrase of the first lesson: *'Vivificabit nos post duos dies; in die tertia suscitabit nos'*, which as early as Tertullian (c. 200) was interpreted of the Resurrection. The difficult responsory that follows it from Habacuc is thoroughly Paschal, for the works the psalmist recalls are the mighty deeds of God who rescued Israel from the bondage of Egypt and brought them through the 'baptism' of the Red Sea and led them through the desert to the Promised Land, flowing with milk and honey. The psalm is a theophany, a manifestation of God's saving power and was interpreted by St Cyprian (c. 250) as teaching the power of the

Cross. The Adoration of the Cross is precisely a celebration of the glorified Cross appearing in the light of the Resurrection even if that light is subdued until its final glory in the night of Easter. We have only to read—or sing!—the *Pange lingua* or to turn to the little antiphon which comes from the Greek liturgy, *Crucem tuam adoramus et sanctam resurrectionem tuam glorificamus*, to see that here we have a celebration of the one mystery that begins in the suffering of the Cross and ends in the glory of the Resurrection. Finally, and more important than all else, is the restoration of Holy Communion to the laity on this day. We receive the glorified and risen body of Christ and any other suggestion would be repulsive.

If it is necessary to insist that we have to do with a unitary celebration of the one mystery, it may be equally necessary to say that the Vigil is neither an epilogue to Holy Week nor a mere anticipation of the physical fact of resurrection. It is the celebration of the whole redeeming work of Christ which stretches back to the first Paschal Lamb and reaches out to the parousia which will come at the end.

This is magnificently set out in the *Exsultet* which we may now consider. The first thing that strikes one about it is that it is a hymn of thanksgiving for the mystery of our redemption: We praise the unseen God and almighty Father because his Son with his sacred blood has done away the ancient condemnation we inherited from Adam (*Adae debitum solvit; veteris piaculi cautionem pio cruore deterisit*). This is the paschal festival when the true Lamb was slain whose blood consecrated the doors of the faithful (We note that the feast is described as *paschal* with all its overtones of Passover.) Then is recalled the passage through the Red Sea and the Israelites are described as *patres nostros*, a phrase that emphasizes the solidarity that exists among all those who in one way and another have belonged or do belong to the Body of Christ. In the next two invocations we are clearly taught that this is a night of redemption in which our Lord's sacrificial death as well as his Resurrection are contributing factors, though there is no indication as to what part each played: 'This is the night when all those who throughout the world believe in Christ are rescued from the corruption of the world and the darkness of sin, are restored to grace and admitted to the fellowship of the saints.' (The present tenses are to be noted: this that happened

two thousand years ago is now made present by the celebration of Easter.) Finally, this is the night when Christ broke the bonds of death and ascended victoriously from the Pit. There can be little doubt that, in this possibly fourth-century hymn, the two phases of the redeeming work of Christ are closely associated, so closely that it is impossible in this and other texts to separate them.

This part of the hymn ends with the famous apostrophe to which no translation does justice: we praise the gentle goodness of God who has bent down to our needs, and his love beyond all price which gave us a Son to ransom those who were no more than slaves; truly, there seems to be a certain compelling necessity about the Sin of Adam that it should have provoked so abundant a redemption: *O certe necessarium Adae peccatum quod morte deletum est! O felix culpa quae talem ac tantum meruit habere redemptorem!*

Certain passages in the next four paragraphs reinforce the themes of the first part: 'This was the night of blessedness which alone was worthy to witness the time and the hour of Christ's Resurrection from the dead, and that is why the holiness of this night banishes crimes, washes away guilt, restores innocence to the fallen and brings joy to those that are sad'. In other words it was a night when our Lord performed a saving act whose effects are made present again to us here and now.

In the next paragraph we meet the phrase: *In huius igitur noctis gratia*. What does it mean? Father J. B. O'Connell in his *Holy Week Manual* translates: 'In thanksgiving for this night'. . . . The editors of the *Missel des Fidèles* have opted for: '*En cette nuit de grâces*'. Father O'Connell's translation is ingenious and seems appropriate since what the deacon is doing at this very moment is to sing a prayer of thanksgiving, a 'eucharist'. But in view of all that has gone before, the French translators are more likely to be right: it is a night of grace, a night when the great flood of grace that redeems the world was released and, by the goodness of God, is allowed to flow in a special manner in this Easter festival. If that is so, then the phrase is the summing up of the redemptive teaching of the whole hymn.

The praise exhausts itself in the last expostulation before we proceed to the petitions: Night 'on which heaven is wedded to earth, the things of God to those of man' (O'Connell); *Nox in qua terrenis caelestia, humanis divina iunguntur*. It is the sum of redemp-

tion, the whole economy of salvation in a phrase. That in fact is what we are celebrating in the Easter liturgy.

This same close association of Cross and Resurrection will be found in what may be regarded as a more 'normal' part of the liturgy, namely the Mass for Easter Day. In the epistle for instance we find: 'For Christ our Pasch has (just) been immolated in sacrifice', and these same words are wonderfully elaborated in the *Alleluia* verse when the chant allows us, almost forces us, to contemplate the central mystery of Christ. It is at once a meditation on the epistle and a pointer to the gospel which sets out in St Mark's factual way the account of our Lord's rising from the tomb. The sequence manages to combine both themes, and forms the perfect introduction to the gospel with its final and triumphant affirmation of faith in the Risen Christ. The hymn begins by invoking the Paschal Victim to whom we pay a tribute of praise. He the Lamb has *redeemed* the sheep; innocent he has reconciled (a Pauline word) us sinners to the Father. What was the meaning of all that had happened from the Agony in the Garden to the Resurrection in the first light of Easter Day? Death and life had met in the final battle for man and his salvation and the *Dux vitae* who was dead now reigns triumphantly alive.

As it were to drive home the truth that it is the 'Lamb that was slain' who now lives in triumph whom we are celebrating and receive in holy Communion, the Communion verse repeats St Paul's statement, once again decorated so to say with rich *Alleluias*, '*Pascha nostrum immolatus est Christus*'.

All the rest of the Vigil service is dominated by the symbol of water which so immediately reminds us of Baptism. The first lesson, the account of the creation, is a type of the re-creation of life that began with the Resurrection and is conveyed to us by Baptism, as the first collect teaches us. The second lesson is one of the classical 'types' of Baptism, the passage of the Israelites through the Red Sea. The collect that follows is a prayer for those to be baptized; we ask God that what he did for the Israelites he may do through the waters of regeneration for the salvation of the Gentiles. Of the more difficult fourth lesson the editors of the *Missel des Fidèles* say: 'To be baptized is to enter the Church, which is the Remnant (spoken of by Isaias in this place), namely the new Jerusalem in which is to be found the presence of God'. This is the interpretation of both the canticle (*Vinea facta*) and of

the collect in which we pray that the Sower of the good seed may set us in his vineyard—the Church—and like the good husbandman cut away the thorns and choking bramble that we may bring forth much fruit. The fourth lesson with its warnings and threatenings is directed to those who are to be baptized to warn them against temptations to fall away and to abuse the great gifts that they have received.

Now that baptisms are somewhat rare at Easter (though the rubrics provide for them), the fact that the Litanies and the Blessing of the water are all part of the one baptismal act is a little obscured. The Litanies are the prayer of the whole Church, both in heaven and on earth, for those who are being baptized. It should not be difficult to make it a prayer for all the baptized throughout the world, a prayer that we may all be faithful to what we committed ourselves to when we were baptized.

The Blessing of the Font is, as has often been observed, a 'eucharistic' prayer which includes an invocation of the Holy Spirit, an *epiclesis*. It is as if it were suggested that as in his earthly life Christ our Lord gave place to the Holy Spirit, so here. For the presence of the Holy Spirit dominates the prayer. His brooding over the primeval waters is recalled in the first part of the prayer, and later the priest prays that those who are to be washed in the saving waters may receive pardon by 'the operation of the Holy Spirit'. It is his breath that will give spiritual power to the waters, and the work of the Son and the Holy Spirit in the redemption of men is vividly portrayed in the ceremony of the plunging of the Candle into the waters with the words set to their lovely chant: *Descendat in hanc plenitudinem fontis virtus Spiritus Sancti*: 'May the power of the Holy Spirit descend into the whole mass of water and make it fruitful to obliterate sin, to regenerate man and make him the child of God'. The infusion of the oils is a further sign of the creative presence of divine power, as we see from the words that are said during the infusion of the Chrism: 'May the Chrism of our Lord Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit flow in these waters in the name of the holy Trinity. Amen.' Here, and in the final prayer, we are taught that the work of man's sanctification is effected by the whole Trinity.

The second theme that we might single out is one that is related to what we had to say about the Resurrection. Water, which is regarded as a creative element, has its 'type' too in the

bitter water of the desert which was made sweet by Moses. But what is more important, it is regarded as having been sanctified by contact with the flesh of Christ who was baptized in it in Jordan. Here we have an ancient patristic tradition, some of which is summed up in the article that St Thomas devotes to the baptism of our Lord.⁵ Somewhat like the Resurrection, though always in dependence upon the sacrificial act of Calvary, it is thought of as generating a source of life that is made available to us in the sacrament.

But what links the Blessing of the Font more closely to the Resurrection than anything else is the theme of regeneration. This is particularly clear in the introductory prayer: 'Almighty and everlasting God, be present to these mysteries, be present to these sacraments that we owe to your great saving love for us; send down your Spirit of adoption upon this people who are to be reborn, these people to whom the *font of Baptism is giving birth.*' The font is the womb of the Church, as one of the most important passages of the Preface makes clear: 'May the Holy Spirit by his mysterious power make fruitful (*fecundate*) this water which is prepared for the regeneration of mankind; may a heavenly offspring, conceived in holiness, come forth from the stainless womb of this divine font . . . to all, whatever their age or sex, grace, like a mother, gives birth, all likewise are made children of God . . .'. The source of this regeneration, as we have seen, is the Resurrection, or rather the Risen Christ who is the head of the Body which by Baptism gives us re-birth, that is a sharing in the 'resurrection' life of our Saviour.

All the themes of the Easter liturgy find their expression in the renewal of the baptismal promises and in the homily which precedes it. In the words of St Paul which all during the service we have been looking for, words that sum up the whole theology of the Resurrection, the voice of the Church comes to us. We have kept vigil, we have celebrated the saving death and Resurrection of our Saviour and through this, with our co-operation, we may renew within us the 'resurrection' grace of our Baptism: we have been buried with Christ and died with him in the waters of Baptism; we have risen with him to a new life. The saving power of Christ has been inserted into us long ago, but now by the renewal of the promises we once made, that power is increased in

⁵ *Summa Theol.*, III, 39, 1.

us, and once more we renounce the devil, the world and the flesh. We acknowledge that we are committed to the cause of Christ, that we must die daily to sin if we would live with him now and hereafter. We conclude with saying the prayer of the Christian who has been regenerated in the womb of the font, the 'Our Father'.

The Mass is the summary of the mystery of Christ's redeeming work: regeneration (collect); life with and in the Risen Christ, and the putting away of earthly things (epistle); the recounting in the Gospel of the great fact of the Resurrection which, with the Cross, was the source of all this new life, and the making present of the divine power of Cross and Resurrection in the holy sacrifice of the Mass: 'It is truly right and fitting that we should always praise thee but more especially on this night when Christ our Pasch was sacrificed. For he is the true Lamb who has taken away the sins of the world, *who by his dying destroyed death, and by his rising restored us to life. . . .*'

This, when all is said and done, is the whole doctrine expressed in two or three phrases. The Mass proceeds with its familiar words, and the prayer after the Consecration reminds us that every Mass is the festival of our Lord's redeeming death and Resurrection which are made present day by day: 'Calling to mind, Lord, the blessed Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ and also his Resurrection from the dead and his ascent into the glory of heaven . . . we offer to thee a pure, holy and unblemished sacrifice. . . .' At Holy Communion the Lamb that was slain but now reigns triumphantly comes to us and unites us as individuals and as the holy people of God to the power of his Resurrection. No wonder that at Lauds after Mass we thank him in the redemptive hymn, the *Benedictus*.

If one wanted to sum up the whole of this matter in a few phrases, one could say that out of the heart of the Mass which re-presents the Passover of the Lord came the primitive weekly vigil; from the vigil came the solemn annual celebration of our Lord's redeeming work, and from this has evolved the whole liturgical year through which, as the Pope has said, we are able to live with Christ who suffered, died and rose again, and is now reigning in glory, calling the People of God to die with him and to rise again until we too pass over into the eternal kingdom of his Love.