

# HOMILY FOR EASTER SUNDAY

## ST MARY'S CATHEDRAL, EDINBURGH

### HOMILY PREACHED BY CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN

SUNDAY 8 APRIL 2007

#### **Introduction:**

My dear people, as we welcome this Easter Morning I find myself reflecting on the richness and variety of the symbols we use to describe the central mystery of our Easter faith. At the heart of our faith is the resurrection of Jesus, his rising to new life, his victory over death, and his coming to make all things new. The symbols we employ to enter into this mystery include darkness, light, water and fire, each symbol one of deep significance. Perhaps the richest symbol of all is earth itself, which St Francis called not sister or brother but mother, and it is richly symbolic that Jesus rises from the depth of the earth, where life begins.

#### **Easter Vigil – and beyond:**

In our Easter vigil last night we reminded ourselves of the story of creation, how, one by one, the earth, the seas, the plants, the creatures and the human family were each created, and how each delighted the creator. “God saw that it was good”, was a refrain we heard over again. We began last night in the darkness and blessed the Easter fire, which lit the Easter candle, a flame we referred to as a Holy light. We blessed the Easter water which was used to baptise and with which we recalled the promises and obligations of our own baptism. It too became holy, and many of us will take this holy water for use in our own homes. And at our Masses this Easter Sunday, with your candles lit from the Easter candle, we will be renewing our Baptismal Promises and again sprinkled with that Holy Water. The wonders and the beauty of creation are therefore brought right here into the heart of our church and our liturgy.

Beyond the doors of our churches we are also made aware in many many ways of the wonder of creation; the blossoms, the spring flowers, the lambs, the first hint of leaves on the trees, are all signs to us of the Creator. We rightly give thanks, and we say today in psalm 117 “This day was made by the Lord, we rejoice and are glad”.

#### **Warning signs in nature:**

But we look at this wonderful creation only a little bit more closely and we see signs that are not wonders, we see signs that are warnings, indeed, dire warnings from experts in their fields of studies. Species are becoming extinct at an alarming rate. A quarter of all **mammals** are in danger of extinction, as are thousands of species of **birds**. **Rain forests** are fast disappearing and have been reduced by half even in my own lifetime. Even in El Salvador recently, changes in forests were pointed out from my first visit to El Salvador shortly after my ordination as Bishop. I cannot help but wonder as I go round schools what will happen to those remaining forests during the lifetime of the children I meet there, so full of vitality and wonder as they consistently are, so trusting of us to make the right choices on their behalf. We fail those children in the way we destroy the land.

Though we have an abundance of **fresh water** here in Scotland we can no longer take it for granted. Other countries which also abounded in fresh water now struggle to provide that basic and God-given resource. Pollution is poisoning our earth, and especially our fresh water. The seas also suffer greatly. Seen from space we are aware just how much of this sacred earth is ocean, but even in this vastness, the dangers and warnings concerning a sustainable future are evident. Over fishing means we now pay a great environmental price. Stocks of many of the fish we have taken for granted and which have been plentiful are now critically low. The majestic whale is at risk as are many other species of ocean life. And now, technology allows us to fish in the deep oceans, never before accessible to us. Far from solving our problems with fishing this is creating new and more catastrophic dangers, because deep sea fish stocks take longer to replenish than any others. I am moved to wonder what Jesus would make of this, how his fisherman friends would react to the crisis we have brought on ourselves?

### **Changes in weather:**

Jesus told us to look to the signs around us, to observe the air and the sky and the weather. **Weather seems to have changed a lot lately.** We hear a great deal these days about climate change and we do well to heed the warnings about global warming that come to us almost daily. But we are mistaken if we consider climate change to be the only problem, imagining that if we fly less or burn less fuel or plant more trees somehow the environmental damage will be corrected. Yes, we must fly less and burn less fuel and plant more trees. But these things alone are not enough, and climate change is not the only crisis we face. Massive and devastating environmental catastrophes continue, unaffected by climate change or carbon emission, and we must take the whole picture into account when we consider the damage being done to our mother earth.

Only last week we saw the publication of the report on Scotland's global footprint, indicating that if all people on the earth consumed and wasted as we do here in Scotland, three planet earth's would be required to sustain us. We take and use much more than our share, and we cannot maintain this any longer.

### **Care for environment – essential element of our Easter faith:**

All that the Easter story raises for us, the creation, the new creation, the light, the earth, abundance, life-giving water, tell us that **care for the environment is an essential element of our Easter faith.** When I think again of that beautiful story of creation in Genesis I am taken slightly aback to read of God's instruction to humans to "be **masters** of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all the living animals on the earth". How are we to understand such an instruction in this day and age?

We must, I believe, **understand this instruction as we understand all other kinds of mastery, and that is in light of the witness and example of Jesus.** He taught us very clearly what it is to be a master. **It is to be a servant.** Far from understanding Genesis as permission to take what we like from the earth, we must consider ourselves to be at the service of the earth, every bit as much as we are the service of our neighbour. Unique among all that God created, it is the human family that is said to be in God's image and likeness. All the more urgent therefore is the demand upon us to cooperate with God in the preservation and nurture of the earth, to be servants.

**How do we proceed as carers of the earth, then?** What do we learn from the Risen Christ of how we exercise our call to be at the service of the planet? What do we learn from the first witnesses to the resurrection of how to live our lives fully and responsibly? Quite simply, **we must learn to live simply**. By living simply we will do all that our Easter faith demands of us. We will serve our neighbour in the name of love and justice, we will serve our planet in the name of all generations to come, to will serve the Lord in honour of the name God has given us – the name of sons and of daughters.

### **Practical action:**

Learning to live simply will ask a great deal of us, and we will need helped along the way. To this end I have once again asked my Justice and Peace Core Group to do all that it can to help this Archdiocese move forward on this road. They will help us to use the materials and ideas developed by a coalition of Catholic organisations that has come to be called the ‘**livesimply project**’. The livesimply project challenges each and every one of us to **play a role in social and environmental justice**. Over the coming months I have asked the Core Group to introduce the key concepts of the livesimply project and I ask as many as possible in the archdiocese to take part in one of the events they will organise.

A few months ago, at my invitation, the environmentalist Mary Colwell came to the Archdiocese and spoke at the Lauriston Jesuit Centre with a powerful challenge. The challenge was directed at me as archbishop, and all of us as the community of faith. She asked me **what I intended to do to tackle the environmental crisis** which she had expertly highlighted for us. I told her that I would do something, but did not at the time know what. I was occupied on many fronts – both internally in our diocese regarding the re-organisation of our Archdiocese; and externally at national level, preparing for the local elections and elections for the Scottish Parliament and at international level as I prepare with others for the next G8 Summit in Germany. As I reflect on the Easter story, I now realise the answer lies here. **Where our Gospel this morning ends** is where we must begin, and that is in the Easter Garden, encountering the Risen Lord. Peter and John return, but Mary stays on, weeping, and that is what we must do. We must weep like Mary, who mourned the loss of her beloved Lord, and we must weep like Jesus who saw what had become of his beloved Jerusalem. We weep because we see what has become of this creation that so delighted God in the beginning. Weeping gave way to something else though, and that was a mission. Mary’s mission was to announce the resurrection to the disciples. Jesus’ mission has been the focus of these last three days. **Our own mission is once more to honour creation, and to serve the creator through that same creation. It is a mission to live simply.**

### **Conclusion:**

In that resurrection garden the moment of realisation for Mary was when she was called by name. Later in John’s Gospel we read: “Jesus said ‘Mary’, and she knew him then”. This Easter, may we each hear our name, hear our call to be servants of the poor and servants of the earth, and may we all receive the grace to live simply. May God indeed be with you all this Easter time and throughout the weeks which lie ahead.