

Heaven Breaking into this world

Homily for April 15-16, 2023

In his one-man theatrical production *Vianney* the actor Leonardo Defilippis dramatized various moments in the confessional as St. John Vianney. St John Vianney lived during the tumultuous aftermath of the French Revolution and was known as a godly confessor and pastor. For decades he served the people of Ars France. People would come from Paris (300 km away) to make their confessions to him because of his godly wisdom and insight. People would camp for as long as three days so he would hear their confessions.

In one “confession” a penitent comes to him and confesses that, while a soldier in the anti-clerical France of the time, he discovered a wounded priest lying amidst some bushes and decided to turn him in for the bounty at the time on priests. As a result, the priest died. The penitent was understandably doubtful that God would forgive such a horrible sin. St. John Vianney simply replied, “thanks to the good God one day you will rejoice with that priest in Heaven.”

Let me tell you another story. It’s about Jim Elliot, a Protestant missionary in Ecuador. He went to preach Christ in an area that was extremely dangerous and hostile to all outsiders. He was warned that he might be killed. He was called a fool for risking death. His reply: “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep for what he cannot lose.”

What is the perspective that St Jean Vianney and Jim Elliot had in common? Because of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead they knew that even now heaven is breaking into this world. Another person who realized this was St Faustina, the Saint of Divine Mercy. Back in the 1930 in Poland just before the 2nd World War Jesus appeared to her and spoke with such clarity about the world to come. He put it like this:

Faustina compared to my mercy your miseries are like a tiny twig being thrown into a roaring fire.

He declared to her that in a world of hatred and violence that was about to be unleashed on the world that nothing was greater than his mercy.

Do you notice that all three of the people I have mentioned lived in the present believing that heaven was breaking into this world? Let me illustrate this with the following Venn diagram. The pink represents this world; the green represents the world to come. Where the green and the pink overlap this is the community of the Church: “We live here” Now there are many people who live thinking all we have is the world in pink. Even for those of us who know of the world that is to come we too can become distressed because this world seems so all pervasive and signs of the world to come don’t appear evident. But this is where people like St Jean Vianney, Jim Elliot and St Faustina come into play. They understood that the world to come is already breaking into this world.

Someone who knew this with such clarity was St. Peter. In the reading from his First Letter he speaks of all three dimensions represented by the Veen diagram.

Peter is writing to Christians who are being persecuted and killed throughout the Roman Empire. And incredibly, he begins not by complaining or pitying but by saying, “Blessed be God.” Why? Because God had given them something far more precious than everything they lost by being persecuted, tortured, and murdered. Listen again to how he begins:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,¹

Last Saturday 11 adults were baptized at the Easter Vigil and at our 5 PM Mass this Saturday two teenagers, Poppy and Clive will be (were) baptized. St Peter says baptism declares we have been born into a living hope. What is hope? It is trust in a promise that has not yet been realized. It is not wishful thinking. Rather it is the conviction that something wonderful awaits me, awaits us, because it has been guaranteed by someone whose word is reliable. Here Peter says we have hope for the future declared by the Resurrection of Jesus Christ that happened 2000 years ago. Now what is that hope? It is a picture of the world to come. Here is Peter’s description of this world.

You have been given birth into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

For Peter’s readers some would lose their earthly life, but will gain eternal, heavenly life, something that he says is “more precious than gold that is perishable even though tested by fire.” He speaks about these Christians rejoicing. Where? Not outside, in the arena where the score was lions ninety-nine, Christians zero; not in the Roman world where they had lost honor and glory and freedom and happiness and life itself. No:

In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, ⁷ so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed²

Peter wanted them to rejoice in knowing that their eternal souls were to gain eternal life and honor and glory and happiness. That’s what Jesus’ Resurrection had won for them. How did they get this precious gift? Not by seeing him, as they saw the lions, and the emperor, and the gladiators, and the blood. But by faith they touched him, and received him, and were given what he had called a “new birth,” a supernatural life, which was in their souls already by their faith

¹ [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#) (1 Pe 1:3). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.

² [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#) (1 Pe 1:6–7). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.

and their Baptism.” Let’s put a value on their earthly life: let’s say it was a million-dollar life. What did they get? Let’s put a value on that. Trillions are much too little.³ This is why he concludes by saying:

Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, ⁹ for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls⁴

For us to live in light of the Resurrection is to understand that while heaven is breaking into this world, the evidence of the world in pink is still all around us.

Having begun with a Venn diagram let me end with something beautiful. This painting of St Thomas encountering the Resurrected Christ is by the Italian painter Carivaggio. It is entitled: *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*. Synonyms for incredulity would be:

- amazement,
- skepticism,
- doubt,
- unbelief,
- wonder.

Do you see how in this painting we have all that St Peter describes in his letter? The world of pain, the present world, is represented by the wound in Jesus’ side where he had been pierced with a lance. The Resurrected Christ represents the world to come. And Jesus lovingly guiding Thomas’ hand with the other apostles present represents the Church, the intersection of these two worlds.

It is always the Mission of the Church to lovingly direct people to Jesus so we can together be part of that community to whom Jesus addresses with his merciful love when he says:

Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”⁵

When we live like this we too affirm that heaven is breaking into this world.

³ Kreeft, Peter. *Food for the Soul: Reflections on the Mass Readings (Cycle A)* (p. 349). Kindle Edition.

⁴ [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#) (1 Pe 1:8–9). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.

⁵ [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#) (Jn 20:29). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.

