

Easter Sunday 2014

Introduction: Is There Anything New Under the Sun?

Soon after Christmas, I came across a well-known passage from the Old Testament. It is found in the Book of Ecclesiastes and it goes this way: "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!" (Ecclesiastes, 1:2) This passage goes on to say: "There is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9). The author seems to say that in spite of human ingenuity and hard work, life fundamentally remains the same and the advantage of our labors is unclear.

To tell you the truth, I wrestled with that Scripture passage. After all, I thought, there are *many* new things under the sun. What about today's amazing advances in medicine and technology? What about scholarly, literary, and artistic attainments? "There's a lot new under the sun!" I thought to myself.

So my problems with this passage of Scripture persisted. Since it was so soon after Christmas, this thought also occurred to me: The birth of Christ is new - the Son of God who assumed our human nature. That never happened before and will never happen again, I reasoned. What would the author of Ecclesiastes have written if had he known that 'the Word would become flesh and dwell among us'? I then slowly began to realize that this ancient author was no mere pessimist. He was challenging me to reflect on my experience as a way of opening my heart.

Accordingly I took note of how many so-called "new" things I had seen in my lifetime. And, looking back, I noticed that most of those "new" things are now quaint. I thought of my first cell phone in the shape of a large wedge with its space-age aerial, or my first lap top that weighed ten pounds and had a battery life of one hour. I reflected on the fact that human progress - amazing as it is - fails to bring lasting satisfaction to the human heart, not to mention those who are hurt by or left out of this parade of progress. It also occurred to this aging baby-boomer that in today's throwaway culture, *people* who have outlived their usefulness are thought of as obsolete. So the question remained, "Is there anything new under the sun?" In a world of planned obsolescence, what is new? What never loses its freshness, its power, its meaning? What retains its capacity to bring joy to the questing human spirit?

Forever Young and a Constant Source of Newness

While wrestling with these thoughts, I turned to Pope Francis, to his beautiful exhortation entitled *The Joy of the Gospel*. One particular passage caught my eye: it's called, "Eternal newness". This is what Pope Francis wrote; he said: "The heart of [the Church's] message will always be the same: the God who revealed his immense love in the crucified and risen Christ ... Christ is the 'eternal Gospel' (Rev. 14:6); he 'is the same yesterday and today and forever' (Heb. 13:8) yet his riches and his beauty are inexhaustible. He is forever young and a constant source of newness" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 11).

This is the newness that Mary and Joseph experienced when they beheld the newborn Savior of the world in the stable at Bethlehem. So too the crowds who heard Jesus preach and witnessed his miracles asked: "What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even unclean spirits and they obey him" (Mark 1:27). Mary of Magdala encountered something utterly new when she went to Jesus' tomb and saw that the stone had been removed. This same unexpected turn of events is what Peter and John encountered. After hearing Mary of Magdala's report, they ran to the tomb and went in. They saw the burial cloths but the Lord they did *not* see.

Soon they *would* see Jesus, the Risen Lord - in the Garden, in the Upper Room, on the Road to Emmaus, at the seashore. What they beheld was not a mere resuscitated corpse, or a ghost, or a product of their collective imaginations. The Risen Lord spoke to them; ate and drank with them; invited the doubting Thomas to touch the wounds in his hands, his feet, his side. Yet now, in him, frail humanity was clothed with immortality, beauty, and glory - with a newness of life that astonished even Jesus' closest followers. If the beloved disciple John believed immediately, the others believed more haltingly. The Risen Lord was so new and so wondrous they couldn't believe their eyes. They were half-joyful, half-incredulous as they grasped for their own Easter faith.

Newness of Life

Although the Apostle Peter was initially slow to believe, overwhelmed by the newness of the crucified and risen Lord, we see him *today* in the Acts of the Apostles boldly proclaiming to one and all the good news of Jesus' Death and Resurrection in the power of the Holy Spirit.

If, as a young man, Saul – who later became St. Paul – rejected Christ and persecuted his followers, *today* he tells us to put away our old way of life & embrace instead Christ's new life. And isn't it the case that the same old sins have a way of reinventing themselves – of dressing up in new guises that promise to make us happy, free & utterly up-to-date, while in fact making us unhappy, unfree, and stale, flattening our relationship with our God, our loved ones, and our colleagues. So using the imagery of the Passover, St. Paul tells us to “clear out the old yeast, so that you may become a fresh batch of dough, inasmuch as you are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7).

What St. Peter did and what St. Paul did, I do today: I invite you to open your hearts to the only reality under the sun which is truly new – Christ, the Son of God made man who died and rose for us and for our salvation. Peter and Paul preached and suffered martyrdom because they wanted us to know the power of Christ's death and resurrection in our lives. They wanted us to embrace that newness of life which comes to us in Baptism whereby we are inserted into the death and resurrection of Christ, whereby Christ begins to live in us, to change us inwardly, and begins even now to impart to us the glory of his self-giving love. Newness of Life! This is what I ardently desire for you and for myself!

God's love for us never grows old – “His mercies are new every morning!” (Lam. 3:22) Christian virtue keeps the human spirit young and free of tired cynicism. Friendship with the Risen Christ nurtured by prayer brings fresh joy every day. The joy we receive from serving the sick & the poor as if they were Christ never fades. Truly, the Risen Lord “is forever young and a constant source of newness.”

Our Baptismal Promises

In a few moments, we will renew our Baptismal Promises. This is more than a pledge to live decently in obedience to the commandments. More than that, it is a renunciation of an old way of life, a rejection of the lure of evil and the mastery of sin. In place of the slavery of sin, we seek the freedom of the children of God, ‘whom we acknowledge as our God and Father of majesty unbounded, the true and only Son of God, worthy of all worship, and the Holy Spirit advocate and guide’ (cf. *Te Deum*).

For those of you who regularly practice your faith, renewing your baptismal

promises is an invitation to grow deeper in the new life of the Risen Christ. For those who practice your faith only rarely, this is an invitation to open your hearts afresh to Christ, to re-embrace the core message of the Gospel, to learn more about your faith, and to become involved the Church's life and mission: her faith, worship, & service.

In the fifth century, Pope St. Leo the Great wrote, "No one ... is denied a share in the victory of the cross." (Office of Readings, Vol. 2, p. 313) So too Pope Francis offers us this invitation: "I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since 'no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord.' The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk; whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realize that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms." (EG, no. 3).

"Christ indeed from death is risen, our new life obtaining! Have mercy, victor King, ever reigning! Amen. Alleluia!" (Paschal Sequence).