

LIGHT AND DARKNESS.

The Encounter of Thomas with Our Lord after the Resurrection in John's Gospel.

An extract from Chapter 15, Vol. 4 of Sr Anne Eason's work, *The Passion of the Image*.

You are free to quote from it, but please acknowledge.

John tells in his Gospel of how Thomas reached into the wounds of Christ in the Upper Room. Augustine reflects as follows on this moment: "...he ... wanted to touch before he would believe, and he said: *I shall not believe unless I place my fingers in the mark of the nails, and unless I touch his wounds.* And on this occasion, He who allows Himself to be contemplated by the gaze of angels, allowed Himself to be touched by the hands of men..."¹ But St Thomas of Villanova points to *John* in this scene: "Blessed hand which explored the secrets of the Lord's heart. What riches did he not find therein!" and "... From there the one disciple takes flight above the stars and writes wonderfully of the Godhead, saying: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* The other, touched by a ray of truth, sublimely exclaims: *My Lord and my God!*"² John by writing his Gospel expresses the faith of Thomas when he touches the wounds of Christ, but unlike Thomas, John was there, he saw and experienced the infliction of those wounds.

John need not have given the details of this conversation between Christ and Thomas in such physical terms, but this is characteristic of John. It raises the point that John helped Joseph of Arimathea to take Christ's Body down from the cross. He not only witnessed the wounds being inflicted, but John also had to remove the nails, the crown of thorns, and ease the Body down. He handled his Lord's Body as no other apostle had. His fingers must have explored these wounds and been covered with His Blood and serum. The Oviedo cloth witnesses to this. In lifting and carrying the Body, wrapping it in the shroud, and placing it in the tomb, John was intimately familiar with the enormity of the Passion. He would have performed these services in the darkness in which Calvary was shrouded for three hours. "... *it was now about the sixth hour and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the Sun's light failed.*" (Lk 22:24) Fingers do not need light in order to see, but see in the darkness, and can see what is beneath the surface out of sight, for example a doctor who probes for internal injury or form beneath the skin. John does all this and therefore would have understood Thomas as he contemplated the image/tableau of him placing his fingers in Christ's wounds. He would have seen the shock in Thomas of the sudden visual collision between the Passion's physical effects and the Resurrected One. Then John would record this as a mystic, in the particular kind of darkness that mystics understand, a darkness which is radiant.³

¹ Augustine's treatises on the First Letter of John as used in *Lectionnaire Monastique*.

² *Op.cit.*

³ For the discussion on this mystic darkness, see *The Passion of the Word*, Chapter 3, subsection *Night*. In Chapter 4: the discussion of darkness as used by John with reference to the Prologue, Genesis and the Aramaic Targamum. Chapter 1: the discussion of darkness in relation to Genesis, Paul, the mystics and Vaughan.

Other Church Fathers have reflected on this moment in John's Gospel. Augustine addresses the subject of Resurrection in terms of Thomas' experience in this way: "... they grasped the solid reality of His body... He also offered Himself to be handled and touched..."⁴ John would have understood that in the image of the encounter between Christ and Thomas he was witnessing again the complete Paschal Mystery. The image of the Resurrected Christ showing His wounds to Thomas was 'not two realities juxtaposed, as if artificially glued together'. This phrase is used by Emmanuel M. Carreira, S.J when describing the spiritual and physical reality in the make-up of man.⁵ It can be used of the Image of Christ before Thomas and John in the Upper Room, to emphasise that the Passion and Resurrection are one, and not two separate realities fixed together. The Upper Room had already witnessed, as shown by Luke, the giving of His Body in the Institution of the Eucharist *before* the Crucifixion, but as one reality without compartments or separation. Is this also not what we who receive the Eucharist encounter? By physically receiving the Body of Christ we touch the Passion and the Resurrection, but we are also thereby touched by and become part of this Paschal Mystery.

To think like this, as John was doing, is to transcend the material yet describe the effects in the material. John was expressing this as a poet and mystic. What I find creative about Carreira's contribution to this discussion is the fact that he was an astro physicist but also a poet and artist. His approach is therefore rounded and whole. In the same paper Carreira, whose doctoral supervisor was Clyde Cowan the co-discoverer of the neutrino, makes this statement: "While we are sitting here, quietly, thousands of neutrinos coming from the sun are passing through us. You will say to me: but it is night. Anyway, they come through the Earth as if it were not there. They are particles that pass through the whole Earth without even knowing that it is there. And they are real particles, it's not a fictitious story. You could have a solid lead wall like from here to a star and the neutrino would pass through it without difficulty. *So what is matter?*" [Italics mine].

To begin to think like this, to open one's mind to invisible realities, including the invisible realities of matter and the mystery of the spiritual governance over matter as described in the Gospels. It is to open the self to receive the Paschal Mystery as it has been handed down to us by the Evangelists. Augustine approaches the mystery of these events in his own time like this: "Christ has risen; that is an absolute fact. He had a body; He had flesh; He hung upon a tree; He breathed forth His soul; His body was placed in a tomb. He, who dwelt in that body, later showed it alive again. Why do we wonder? Why do we not believe? It is God who has done this; reflect on the One who did this, and you eliminate all possibility of doubt."⁶

⁴ Augustine: Homily for Paschaltide as used in *Lectionnaire Monastique*.

⁵ *Resurrection from quantum physics*: Manuel Carreira, a Jesuit priest, theologian, philosopher and astrophysicist, member of the Spanish Center of Sindonology, who died in 2020.

⁶ *Op. cit.*