

A time of liberation and forgiveness

The founder of l'Arche reflects on the message of peace that Jesus gave to his disciples, and that is there for all of us / By JEAN VANIER



MOST Christians think of the Resurrection as a victory of life over death. Finally, Jesus has won. But how did the first disciples live the Resurrection of Jesus? Reflecting on this can help us

to see how we are called to live Easter.

For the Jews, the Passover is the feast of liberation, the anniversary of God's freeing of the Jewish people from the yoke of the Egyptians. So Easter is also the feast of liberation. Let's come back to the gospel scene. The Galileans to whom Jesus preached were terribly persecuted by the Romans, by Herod and all his followers, by the oligarchs who obliged the already impoverished to pay more taxes, and even by the priests of the temple.

The disciples of Jesus were certain that he was the Messiah; he spoke with great authority, he performed amazing miracles. The last of these miracles was the resurrection of Lazarus. They were sure that something great would happen on the feast of the Passover, the anniversary of the great liberation, something which would show clearly that Jesus was the Messiah, the one who had been announced in the psalms as a victorious king.

But what in fact happens? There is no victory. Jesus is condemned to a horrible death. He is stripped of his clothes and of his dignity. He is crucified. His disciples are shattered. Jesus was not the Messiah after all - he couldn't be, because the Messiah was one who would be triumphant, who would win. So they run away; they fall into a world of depression. They had given everything for Jesus; now they are completely lost. They had been mistaken about him all along. Some, no doubt, even feel angry with Jesus.

On Easter morning they find it difficult to believe the women who tell them that they have seen Jesus alive. It can't be true. The women must be imagining things. Two of the disciples leave the group for Emmaus. Others remain behind locked doors. They don't know what to do. Then, suddenly, Jesus is among them, even though the doors have not been unlocked. And all he says is, "Peace to you". He looks at each one of them with eyes of love and of forgiveness.

And, in this moment, these disciples, one by one, shift from a feeling of terrible guilt and of shame because they had not believed, to joy and amazement in his presence. Jesus just says, "Peace". Nothing more. He lives with each one a moment of communion, which is forgiveness. So the feast of Easter, the feast of liberation, is essentially the feast of the forgiveness of God. His followers, who had lost

faith in him, are liberated from their guilt and shame.

Jesus loves each one of them - and he loves each one of us. He wants us all to be alive, to be fully loved and fully loving. He wants us to be "Easter people", people of the resurrection, people who accept forgiveness, and who forgive others. So often we forget the message of the Gospel. We are taken up by the things of the world. We want to win more money and more power - perhaps in order to do good. Jesus comes simply to forgive, to give his peace.

What happens next? Jesus says to the disciples, "As the Father has sent me, I send you". He breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit". Then he sends them out to be messengers of peace and of forgiveness, to go into the world to forgive all those enslaved in guilt. This is the message of Easter. Jesus liberates us from guilt - and he calls us to liberate others.

MANY OF US live in a state of unease. We may not be fully aware of it, but we often carry a hidden burden that is close to guilt. We all know the gospel message exemplified by the story of the poor man covered in sores who lives in the streets near the home of a very rich man who feasts sumptuously every day (Luke 16:19-31). The end of the parable is painful to read. Is Jesus asking us to sell everything we have and give all to the poor? Surely that is not possible. Don't we have a family? What about our children, who need feeding and clothing?

Jesus on the feast of the Resurrection looks at each one of us with more love than we can dare believe. He forgives us our shortcomings; he frees us from our guilt. He then sends us off to forgive others, so that they can be free from guilt. Each one of us is called to bring peace where there is conflict. We are not all called to sell everything we have. We are all called to be committed to one person who is in pain, who is lonely and lost and who needs a friend.

This is the Resurrection.