

Your RISUS PASCHALIS, or Easter joke. A little girl lost her front teeth and it caused her to talk with a lisp. One day her grandmother was reading to her from the King James Version of the Bible. The little girl heard words such as 'sayeth' and 'hath' and 'doth' and so on. After a while, the little girl asked her grandmother: "Did God have his teeth out too?" Does this mean that a dentist is ultimately behind the King James Version?!

The heart of my homily is the last sentence in today's Gospel: "I came that they may have life, and have it to the full." There is no other word more expressive of the Easter mystery than life. John's gospel has been called the gospel of life. Not only is life a favorite word in John. The author makes clear that life is why he wrote the Gospel: "That you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name." (Jn 20:31) That we may have life.

Three questions for three points. First, what does being alive say?

This is important, because John did not select 'life' out of a hat; he selected it because it says something, because it is a powerful everyday symbol. It says different things to different people at different times. Martin Luther King crying "Free at last!"Lazarus emerging from the tomb.....astronauts walking on the moon....Pavorotti reaching his high C.....Nelson Mandela striding triumphant from his South African prison cell....a child licking an ice-cream cone. Each of these is thrillingly alive.

There is a moving account of such life describing the cellist Pablo Casals. When he was 90, he was dreadfully afflicted by rheumatoid arthritis and emphysema. Each morning was a struggle. He could hardly dress himself. He would shuffle into the living room each morning on the arm of his lovely young wife Marta, badly stooped, head pitched forward. He would move to the piano, arrange himself with difficulty on the bench, and somehow raise his swollen, clenched fingers above the keyboard. Let Norman Cousins tell you what he saw:

"I was not prepared for the miracle that was about to happen. The fingers slowly unlocked and reached toward the keys like the buds of a plant toward the sunlight. His back straightened. He seemed to breathe more freely. Now his fingers settled on the keys. Then came the opening bars of Bach's WELL-TEMPERED CLAVICHORD, played with great sensitivity and control.....He hummed as he played, then said that Bach spoke to him here – and he placed his hand over his heart.

Then he plunged into a Brahms concerto and his fingers, now agile and powerful, raced across the keyboard with dazzling speed. His entire body seemed fused with the music; it was no longer stiff and shrunken, but supple and graceful and completely freed of its arthritic coils.

Having finished the piece, he stood up by himself, far straighter and taller than when he had come into the room. He walked to the breakfast table with no trace of a shuffle, ate heartily, talked animatedly, finished the meal, then went for a walk on the beach.

When have we felt so gloriously alive that it almost hurts? When you felt the first stirring of another life within you – or smiled for the first time on your newborn child? Skimming over a Lake Jordan on waterskis, with the wind and the foam on our face? When someone's eyes met ours in true and lasting love? Stuffing the basket high above the rim? Singing at church with abandon? Downing a mug of Michelob on a steamy hot day? When we plunged into a pool for the first swim of the summer? Seeing the candle-lit faces of our brothers and sisters at the Easter Vigil? What makes us feel alive?

Which brings me to a second question: What does it mean to be alive in Christ? Well, ALL OF THE ABOVE – but raised to the nth power. ALL OF THE ABOVE – and then some. When John speaks of ‘eternal life,’ he does not mean simply a life in a distant age, life in heaven to come. ETERNAL LIFE IS NOW. Eternal life is a relationship that BEGINS HERE ON EARTH. That’s how Catherine of Siena could say: “All the way to heaven IS heaven.”

I once heard the late scripture scholar Roland Murphy say that for the psalmist, a person was never more dead than when they were in Sheol, the underworld – because there a person cannot SING the praises of God; and so our relationship with God, OUR LIFE, was over. WHICH MEANS THAT WE ARE NEVER MORE ALIVE THAN WHEN WE ARE SINGING – SINGING THE PRAISES OF GOD. NOW THERE IS A BEGINNING FOR ETERNAL LIFE! SINGING IN CHURCH! SINGING OUR HEARTS OUT! If we check out all of the biblical data on heaven – there are 2 things that we are going to be doing in heaven for eternity – EATING AT A GREAT BANQUET – and SINGING THE PRAISES OF GOD – and I’m sure there will be LOTS of INCENSE! So I’m just trying to get us all ready right now! I’ll know I’ve succeeded when the whole first row looks like smoked hams!

This eternal life was manifest in the words, actions, and miracles of Jesus – and in His death and resurrection. How do we receive this life? John tells us by believing in Jesus. We are given this life in baptism – given it in the Spirit; given it in the sacraments – given it especially in the Bread of LIFE in the Eucharist.

Eternal life is not poetic fancy. “Eternal life,” Jesus said, “consists in this, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” (Jn 17:3) And here we are back to Roland Murphy’s relationship – the kind of knowing that comes through prayer, through the Eucharist, through our communion with our brothers and sisters in the church.

Third and final question: How alive are you? We all know people who, while not dead, are not really alive. They died years ago but were too cheap to pay for the funeral! We run into them all the time. I want to say to them: “If you are happy, please inform your face!” These are the people who thought everything was better years ago, and that everything new is no good; or 2 people just existing in a marriage that has turned deadly dull; students who are just biding time until they graduate and get into the ‘real’ world; people who never risked anything, never tried anything, never dared anything – they even eat the same boring things day after day and year after year; people who hate their jobs and most everyone around them.

We see it in the church too. What agonizes me is the large number of Christians who have God’s life in them but are barely alive. They have LRQ – that’s LOW RELIGIOUS QUOTIENT! They do only what they have to do, stay out of serious sin, have little if anything to confess. But the Christ within them does not thrill them, gives them no goose-bumps. They give stingily, avoid any involvement or service to anyone, and are just punching a ticket on Sundays as a form of fire insurance.

But why look for the living among the dead? Jesus is the one that gives us life. Jesus is HERE AND NOW in our lives. Do we recognize Him as our very existence? Life in Christ is life in us – Christ growing in us until we become fully human, fully alive. The paradox of all of this is that life can be full and still be spotted with pain. The proof stares us in the face, from Christ to Casals, from the empty tomb to an empty nest. To live Christ’s life, to live Easter joy-filled life, it is not enough to have life – we must LIVE LIFE, feel it, open up to it, let it sway us and have its way with us. In her poem, “AURORA LEIGH,” Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning gives poetic expression to this: “Earth’s crammed with heaven/ And every common bush afire with God;/ But only he who sees takes off his shoes,/ The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.”

Life’s real enemy is not pain, not even death; life’s true enemy is boredom. We just miss what is all around us.

A story to conclude. He looked so holy that I simply asked him, "Tell me what God is like." With feather gentleness he replied, "It is Lent now. I'm accustomed to refrain from talking during Lent. But take this book." (It was the book he had been writing in.) "If you read this at the right hour, it will tell you what God is like." I couldn't wait to bring it back and share it with my wife. Back home, she was a little less excited than I about the book because her mind was on our first child that she was carrying. "What did he mean by 'at the right hour?'" she asked.

I didn't know. We began to speculate. Maybe at noon on Good Friday. Maybe after the Easter Vigil. Maybe at the moment when we are in deep distress. Perhaps we should wait for God to reveal to us the right hour. It might even be years from now. We decided to wait for a sign.

Two weeks later our first son was born. How can I tell you what it was like? First the worry, the – that child! I was a father. You grow up when you become a father. When I looked at that child I was so proud. I knew I was somebody. And yet humbled. I scarcely knew how to hold him, much less to bring him up. I used to think I had it all figured out, but that kid was bigger than I.

That night the child appeared to me in a dream. "What is God like?" he asked. That did it. I got up and reached for the book. I brought it to my wife and told her, "This is the right hour. We'll open it now."

I opened it at random. I read. "It's very simple. God is a father." My wife opened it again. She read. "It's very simple. God became a little child." "Let's open it again," I cried, "together." I took her hand. She opened it, and we read, "It's very simple. Each breath you breathe is the breath of God."

So may it be for you and for me. Amen. (final story from THE MAGIC MONASTERY, Theophane, p. 34-35, and homily help from Walter Burghardt, SIR, WE WOULD LIKE TO SEE JESUS, p. 65-69)