

Fr. Arturo Sosa, S.J.

13th April Easter Thursday Acts 3: 11-26 Psalm 8

Luke 24: 35-48

6pm at Campion Hall, Oxford

It is a great joy for me to be with you this Easter. As you may be aware, it is my first visit to Britain. As someone who has worked in the intellectual apostolate, it is especially meaningful for me to be with my Jesuit companions and their collaborators in this ancient University city of Oxford. It is in the medieval universities of Europe that the great synthesis of faith and reason took such a decisive form. Unlike the older orders of the Church, we Jesuits came too late to history to be part of that process; nonetheless we absorbed its fruits and contributed to later iterations of scholasticism – for good and for ill! (And it goes without saying that your Thomist Master, Father Nick Austin, is an example of the good!)

We Jesuits are more often associated with the humanism of the Renaissance. And I can see that this spirit has marked and continues to mark the intellectual activity that takes place here at Campion Hall. I am thinking of the work of so many Jesuits and others in the humanities: in literature and poetry, the study of languages (ancient, modern and indigenous), and in history, law and philosophy, spirituality and theology. The social sciences have a notable place here too: recent scholars have specialised in some of the major questions of contemporary political science, which is my own area of interest, in human rights and the struggles of the countless displaced people of the modern world.

More recently, you have added a highly distinctive specialisation: the work of the Laudato Si' Research Institute in furthering theological and philosophical reflection on integral ecology. I am delighted to see the British Province undertake such a bold and necessary initiative, and I want to congratulate Professor Celia Deane-Drummond and her remarkable team for the progress they have made in implementing so rapidly their vision of the Institute. The LSRI responds to the fourth of the Universal Apostolic Preferences, "to work with others to care for the protection and renewal of God's Creation with Gospel depth." But it also has its roots further back in the thirty-sixth General Congregation of 2016 which called on the Society to respond to "the multifaceted challenge of caring for our common home" by, among other things, convoking our "theologians, philosophers, and other intellectuals and experts" to "contribute to the rigorous analysis of the roots of and solutions to the crisis." (D1, 30). "Gospel depth" is not only moral and spiritual but intellectual too. The contribution of the Society of Jesus to the huge and complex questions facing humanity today must be marked by all these demanding dimensions.

The Church helpfully fills the liturgies of this great Easter week not only with the Gospel narratives of Christ's resurrection in all their diversity and strangeness but also with an account of how that new life expands and spreads through the missionary activities of the early Church, the Acts of the Apostles. It could not be made clearer that the Gospel is no disincarnate story, a "narrative" (to use a fashionable term) which the Church deploys to explain herself, but an unsettling, galvanising life-force which impels the community of believers outwards, beyond itself and into the wider world with energy and confidence. As Peter puts it: "it is the name of Jesus which, through our faith in it, has brought back the strength of this man!"

I am used to visiting Jesuit universities around the world and reflecting with them on the challenges they face today: their identity, their pedagogy, the way in which they form young people with a passion for the Gospel, the way they engage secular society in all its complexity, including the new politics of populism. A Jesuit university bears the name of Jesus in a particularly straightforward way, and it has the task of forging a comprehensive culture shaped

by faith in the name of Jesus. In theory we should expect a Jesuit university to preach and live that faith in its intellectual pursuits, in its pastoral provision, in its administrative function and in the relationships and solidarities it enters into. Last year I had the pleasure of addressing the International Association of Jesuit Universities and I stressed to them the importance of solidarity in the life of the Jesuit university: the solidarity we feel as members of one human family “enriched by intercultural and intergenerational relationships, always ready to lend a hand to whoever needs it.” That entails finding concrete expressions of both personal and institutional solidarities as “proper to our way of being and proceeding.” That is the theory, anyway! The struggle, as you know, in our universities these days is to live up to this fine ideal, by finding concrete ways of expressing our faith and solidarity institutionally when there is such always a strong pull towards a way of proceeding marked increasingly by technocracy, utilitarianism and ideology.

It strikes me that Champion Hall is an unusual, perhaps unique institution in the Society: an authentic Jesuit presence within an ancient and elite University which, while secular today, has profoundly Christian roots. As a small, self-contained institution you do not need to worry so much about losing your charism or its dilution into slogans and cliches. Your Jesuit character is more or less assured. (Please take care of it! Without faith in the name of Jesus, the Society of Jesus is nothing!) No, your challenge must surely be to speak out of the clarity of that faith into this great, world-class centre of learning, a University which has so much to teach us and yet which is no longer entirely at home in the Christian skin it has inherited from its medieval foundation.

How can we imagine that task, intensely practical as it is? The Gospel of the Risen Lord can illuminate us. The disciples in their agitated state seem to think that the man who has appeared among them is a “*pneuma*”, a spirit. And with that thought comes a strange and disabling fear. The Risen Christ is at pains to point out that he is flesh and bones, that he can eat and be touched and that he carries still the wounds inflicted on him during his Passion.

What is at stake here? It’s not that surprising that a ghost should provoke fear and anxiety. For one thing, a ghost is an unboundaried being. Spirits can get inside us and affect our behaviour against our will. They can possess us and play tricks with our minds. For so many of our secular-minded contemporaries, Christianity is a disembodied thing, a ghost hovering over the culture with its strange memories and other-worldly mood. They worry that it can find its way into the heads of vulnerable people and distort their consciousness.

But there is more. The ghost the disciples surely dread is that of the angry victim, the Jesus they abandoned and betrayed coming back to haunt and torment them. An uncontained spirit of vengeance is a truly terrifying thing. Again, do our contemporaries not fear that Christians and indeed believers of all faiths are just this, an uncontained movement of reaction and resentment, furious at the freedoms and liberations of the modern age?

The role of Champion Hall is surely to show the wider University that the Gospel is no spectre of retribution. It is flesh and bones. And it’s friendly. It’s real. You can touch it and feel it. It’s not some disembodied ethos. It’s people living together in solidarity because God lives in total, unconditional solidarity with them. When people see that they will not necessarily understand the fullness of what is going on, but their anxiety and their dread will fall away. And it’s because what they see is human. It’s something they recognise. Something they can relate to. And it is well-disposed to them. It comes in peace.

“Peace be with you!”