

## EASTER DAY (2018)

This morning I draw your attention to one verse, one line, of the Gospel story which we have just read. We heard how Simon Peter *'went right into the tomb, saw the linen cloths on the ground, and also the cloth that had been over his head. This was not with the other cloths but rolled up in a place by itself.'*

Why is such a detail provided - the face cloth not cast on the ground with the others, but carefully rolled or folded up in a place by itself? Clearly that must have some significance for the evangelist John to make note of it at the time, and then to take the trouble to recall it to us.

The reason is to be found in the social custom of the Jews in those days - the folded or rolled napkin or face cloth was a sign given at the dining table by the master of the house to indicate to the servants that he had not yet finished eating. If he *had* finished then he would rise from the table, wipe his fingers and mouth and beard, and then simply wad up the napkin and toss it on the table. The servants would then know to clear the table and put everything away.

That is a custom followed at formal mealtimes to this day, and not only among the Jews. It was something my mother and father taught me to do on the rare occasions when we went out to an expensive, 'classy' restaurant or if I was a guest with them at some special function which included a banquet of several courses and waiters hovering at a discreet distance to clear away the plates.

In Gospel times the social custom familiar to Jesus was just so. If the master got up from the table, and folded his napkin, and laid it beside his plate, the servant would not tidy things away. He knew that the Master would return.

The folded napkin was an unspoken message: it meant: **I am coming back!**

That is the very message left in the tomb by Jesus: *'I will return'*.

Today we recall how Jesus did indeed return and has met up with his disciples in many places and many times - from the first Easter Sunday to this one.

The first disciples saw, and heard, and touched him: in the Garden where he had been buried; in the Upper Room; on the road to Emmaus; on the Lakeside: *'They knew very well...it was the Lord'* (John 21:12).

But countless generations of Christians have known Jesus present in their lives - addressing them in their heart of hearts, guiding and encouraging them with the word of his Gospel, calling them to follow him more bravely and generously in the story of their days. In company with those who walked with him in ancient times we too, today, *'have known him in the Breaking of the Bread'* (Luke 24:35)

This is our faith, our expectation. And in expressing it afresh - as we do today - we strengthen it, deepen it, renew it. All the more so because we do that together, in the company of fellow believers. Our hearts - which may waver when we feel that we are on our own - are reassured and encouraged by one another.

You will remember the story in the Gospel of the anxious and uncertain man who put his trust in Jesus: *'Lord, I believe! Increase my faith!'* (Mark 9:25) That is a prayer it is appropriate for us to echo in our hearts today. 'Lord, I believe! Increase my faith!'

We can say it together, in the plural, for one another: **Lord, we believe...increase our faith.**