

Oh, I wish you could have been there! Where I hear you say? - Well, let me explain. At the General Audience with the Pope during the Society of Mary General Chapter in October last year, Pope Francis gave his Apostolic blessing to everyone present, blessing the sacred objects we carried. Nothing unusual there. But here comes the special part - he specifically extended his blessing to everyone we held in our heart. So, through the few Marists present, we had a sense that all Marists were receiving this blessing and way out to so many more. You were very much in our hearts, including your families and intentions. It was so affirming to hear those words and I continue to pray that blessings are still flowing.

A Chapter sets the direction for eight years. Pope Francis' audience that day was on "Missionaries of Hope today". His theme struck me as evocative of our Marist call. He reminded us that the Christian is "*not a prophet of misfortune*". I guess Kiwis would say Christians shouldn't go around spreading doom and gloom. He said the nucleus of our "*proclamation is the opposite of misfortune:*" it is sharing the joy "*of Jesus who died for love and whom God raised on Easter morning.*" It got me wondering... does Christian Faith end at the death and burial of Jesus? The Pope said that many heroic figures lived great lives and died for an ideal, but if the Gospel ended there it would be an inspiring story, even a comforting and challenging one, but how would it be a proclamation of hope? I am going to share the essence of the Pope's reflection that day for us, as we move towards Easter. Direct quotes are in *Italics*.

Because the Gospels go far beyond Jesus' death to something extravagantly transformative for all humanity, we are called to live in Hope. Good Friday is only 'Good' because of - you're right - the Resurrection! Disciples of Jesus felt dejected after the Crucifixion. The stone rolled tight across the tomb, seemed to seal off the three thrilling years they had lived with the Teacher of Nazareth. It felt like everything was over and some of them, disappointed and dejected were already leaving Jerusalem with their hopes crushed.

Then comes the proclamation that sets the world aflame with hope. "***Jesus is Risen! This unexpected fact overturned and amazed the minds and hearts of disciples.***" Jesus was not risen just for his own sake as some special case to be envied like a Greek God. At the Ascension Jesus returned to the Father enabling "*his Resurrection to be shared with every human being and to take every creature Above*". Then "*on the day of Pentecost, the disciples were themselves transformed by the breath of the Holy Spirit. Not only would they have good news to share with everyone, but they themselves would become different from before, as reborn to new life. The Resurrection of Jesus transforms us through the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is alive. He is alive **amongst** us. He is living and has the power to transform.*" That is why in the Mass we say Christ **IS** risen. We never say Christ '**has**' risen in the past tense; Jesus **IS** present and risen amongst us today.

Pope Francis encourages us: "*How beautiful it is to think of ourselves as proclaimers of the Resurrection of Jesus, not only in words, but also in our conduct and testimony of life!*"

Jesus does not want disciples who are merely able to repeat memorized formulas. He wants witnesses: people who spread hope, with their way of welcoming, smiling and loving; above all loving because the power of the Resurrection makes Christians capable of loving even when love seems to have lost its motivation. Faith, our hope, is not just optimism; it is something much more! It is as if believers have an additional 'piece of heaven' over their heads. That is beautiful: we are people with an extra piece of heaven over our heads, accompanied by a presence which some are not even able to sense." Isn't that a reality worth pondering?

One of the tenets of Marist spirituality and Marian Mothers is hospitality. Creating space for others where they can encounter the love and mercy of God. Pope Francis said, *"the task of Christians in this world is to open spaces for salvation, like regenerative cells, capable of infusing the blood of life into what seems lost forever. When the sky is cloudy, we are blessed, when someone talks about the sun... the true Christian is like this: not whiny or angry, but convinced through the power of the Resurrection that no evil is infinite, no night is without end, no man or woman is definitively wrong and no hatred impervious to love."* Wow!!

Pope Francis acknowledges the high price disciples sometimes pay for this hope given them by Jesus. He reminds us the martyrs' fidelity to Christ says that injustice will not have the final word on life. Christians look beyond what can be seen with the eyes. They always look beyond and bring heaven into hearts. *"Whoever has had the grace of embracing the Resurrection of Jesus can still hope in the un hoped for. In the Risen Christ we can continue to hope."*

Francis concludes his reflection saying, *"The men and women who have a 'reason' to live, resist better than others in times of misfortune. But, those who have Jesus at their side, **do not fear anything!** This is why true Christians are never easy, accommodating people. Their meekness should not be confused with insecurity or submission. St Paul spurred Timothy to suffer for the Gospel, saying the following: 'God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, love and self-control' (2 Tim 1:7) When Christians fall, they always rise again. We are missionaries of hope as Christians, not by any merit of our own, but thanks to Jesus, the grain of wheat which fell to the earth, died and bore much fruit. (cf. Jn 12:24)*

Now I don't know about you, but I am deeply challenged by Pope Francis' perspective. I hope the whole Marist family is inspired by this prophetic call. If I had to live up to this vision of discipleship on my own strength, I'd run a mile. But I remember the blessing of Pope Francis extends to all those held in our hearts. I don't do this on my strength. We have Christ and we are the family of Mary. My primary task is to welcome Jesus into my Nazareth, and invite the Holy Spirit into my life, saying 'yes' as Mary did. Then I become a person of hope and courage who can trust that my simple daily efforts are graced to somehow become little pieces of heaven for others.

So, Easter Blessings! HE IS RISEN!

That is our call. That is our proclamation. That is the Truth we live everyday by.

God bless, Bev