

THE EASTER VIRTUES

BY

ST FRANCIS DE SALES¹

On the Tuesday in Easter week, April 12th, 1594, St Francis de Sales preached a short but very beautiful homily on the theological virtues. He draws from the appearance of our Lord related in the Gospel of the day a charming description of the virtues of faith, hope and charity, and shows how fittingly each one is connected with the risen Christ.

Our authority for dating this sermon is the edition of 1643, which the recent Annecy Edition preserves. The 1643 edition was the first to give it as being preached on Easter Tuesday; it has no title in the edition of 1641. Certain analogies of style between the following sermon and those of the first period of the Saint's life justify this attribution.

This homily has won the distinction of finding a place in the Breviary. For the feast of one of his own daughters in the Visitation Order, St Margaret Mary, the Bishop of Geneva has been chosen to supply the homily of the third Nocturn at Matins. The last lesson of the Office is taken from the concluding paragraphs.

Taking as his text Christ's greeting to his disciples Peace be upon you, he begins:

Peace be upon you.



SURELY there was great joy in Noah's ark when the dove, which had set out but a little while before as though to discover in what state the world lay, came back at last carrying a bough of an olive tree in her mouth—a sure indication that the waters had subsided and that God had restored to the world the happiness of his peace (Genesis 8, 10).

But think of the joy, the jubilation, the gaiety that enraptured the band of the Apostles when they beheld the sacred humanity of the Redeemer reappearing among them after the Resurrection, bearing in his mouth the olive of a holy and acceptable peace: *Peace be unto you*, and showing them the unquestionable marks and signs of man's reconciliation with God: *And he shewed them his hands and his feet* (Lk. 24, 40). Surely their souls were wonderfully bathed with consolations: *The disciples saw the Lord and were glad* (Jn. 20, 20).

¹ Translated from the *Oeuvres . . . Edition complète*, Vol. VII, sermon xvii (Annecy, 1896), by Vincent Kerns, M.S.F.S.

But this joy was not the most important fruit of that blessed vision; their wavering faith was made firm, their dismayed hope was inspired with confidence, and their waning charity fanned into flame.

This is the theme of the address which I have set myself; but I cannot develop it properly, nor can you listen with profit, without the help of the Holy Ghost. Let us invoke him, then, lending worth to our prayers by availing ourselves of the blessed Virgin's intercession. Hail Mary . . .

Meanwhile, faith, hope and charity persist, all three; but the greatest of them all is charity (1 Cor. 13, 13). Faith for the understanding, hope for the memory, charity for the will. Faith gives honour to the Father, by leaning on his almighty power; hope gives honour to the Son, since it is based on his redemption; charity gives honour to the Holy Ghost, because it embraces goodness and loves it dearly. Faith sets the bliss of heaven before us, hope makes us aspire after it, charity puts us in possession of it.

They are necessary, but only *meanwhile*; for in heaven charity alone remains. Faith finds no entrance there, for all things are visible; there is less room still for hope, because the blessed possess everything; charity alone finds a place there, to love God in all, through all, and above all. Elias let fall his mantle (4 Kings 2, 13): the mantle of faith and the veil of hope never go up into heaven, but remain on earth where there is need of them.

While on earth, our Saviour was content merely to teach three lessons well: the way to believe, the way to hope, the way to love. But especially was this his care during those *forty days* of intercourse with his disciples after his resurrection, and particularly on the occasion of the appearance related today.

And, to begin with, *the disciples had assembled* in the upper room and had locked *the doors on themselves, for fear of the Jews* (Jn. 20, 10). The Saviour entered, greeted them and showed them *his hands and his feet*. Why did he do this?

1. As a foundation for their faith. Alas, how shaken was that faith! Poor Magdalen went looking for him *among the dead* (Lk. 24, 6) to embalm him, and thought he had been *carried away* (Jn. 20, 25). The Apostles were such that, on being told by the women of their encounter with the angel and his message, *to their minds the story seemed madness, and they could not believe it* (Lk. 24, 11). The two pilgrims said: *we had hoped* (id. 21). The great St Thomas exclaims: *You will never make me believe* (Jn. 20, 25). And so as a support to this faith, which was on the point of breaking down, he

came and said: *Peace be upon you*, and showed them his body.

But how can they be said to believe, when they have seen and touched?² Their senses were like billeting officers who provide lodgings for others, but do not stay there themselves. They deposited faith in the hearts of the Apostles and ourselves and yet no longer remain there in any useful capacity; for once faith is present the work of the senses is finished, just as a needle has served its purpose once it has drawn the thread through the material. . . .³

2. Hope. Alas, their hope was weak: *we had hoped*. They were afraid; hope is incompatible with fear. *They mourned and wept*, says St Mark (16, 10). It is a terrible misfortune to be separated from God; we become timid, and lose our strength. The Apostles and Magdalen were in this plight. The poor barque of the Apostles without hope was like a ship in the throes of storm and tempest which, without helmsman or pilot, breaks in pieces wherever it is hurled by the wind: *And Ephraim is become as a dove that is decoyed, not having a heart* (Osee 7, 11). I would not like us to be without hope, but I would really like us to weep when we lose God. *As the heart panteth after the fountains of water, so my soul panteth after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth after the strong living God. When shall I come and appear before the face of God?* (Ps. 41, 1-3).

But our Lord comes to bring relief to that room besieged by fear: *Look at my hands and my feet* (Lk. 24, 39). Are you in need of strength, here are my hands (Hab. 33, 4). Do you want to be of good heart, here is mine. Are you the *dove*, here are the *hollow places* (Canticle 2, 14). Are you sick, here is the remedy: *And death is swallowed up in victory* (1 Cor. 15, 54). Are you prisoners, here is your release (Isaias 12, 1; Lk. 4, 19). Indeed, how could we be afraid? *Behold he cometh, looking through the windows, looking through the lattices* (Canticle 2, 8-9).

3. Charity. *Can a woman forget her infant, so as not to have pity on the son of her womb? And if she should forget, yet will not I forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee in my hands* (Isaias 49, 15-6). He has taken upon himself our misfortunes and has ennobled them; he has taken our distress to his heart: *he shewed them his side* (Jn. 20, 20).

² Cf. St Gregory the Great: *Hom. xxiv in Evang.*, 8.

³ At this point, the Saint gives some examples of the articles of faith which are established by the Resurrection; but as they are in note form, not completely worked out, and in any case add very little to his argument, I have not thought it necessary to translate them here. Accordingly, we shall pass on to the next point of the sermon.

But let us return him love for love. Otherwise, he who shows his wounds out of love, will one day show them in wrath and indignation, like pictures which portray a woman on the right side and a corpse on the left, on the right a lamb and on the left a lion; like bees, which are the makers of honey and yet sting most painfully. Then *look*, you scoffers, you who delight in banter, shameless and brazen-faced, *look at my hands*, etc. *They will look upon the man whom they have pierced, . . . and he shall bring lamentation to all the tribes of the earth* (Zach. 12, 10; Jn. 19, 37; Apoc. 1, 7).

Grant, O good Jesus, that we may accept the peace which you offer, and look upon your wounds. And while *faith, hope and charity persist* (1 Cor. 13, 13), grant that *rooted in faith* (Col. 2, 7), *buoyed up by hope and aglow with love* (Rom. 12, 10-2), we may look forward, *blessed in our hope, to the day when there will be a new dawn of your glory* (Tit. 2, 13).

Grant that in that day, as we stand on your right hand, we may behold in you a lamb, and not the lion which those see whose position is on your left. May clear vision replace our faith, possession our hope, and may our imperfect love give place to perfect love in which we shall delight for ever and ever. Amen.

