

Easter Sunday – The Easter Vigil A

Easter proclamation (Exsultet)

Rejoice, heavenly powers! Sing, choirs of angels! Exult, all creation around God's throne!

Jesus Christ, our King, is risen! Sound the trumpet of salvation! Rejoice, O earth, in shining splendour, radiant in the brightness of your King! Christ has conquered! Glory fills you! Darkness vanishes for ever! Rejoice, O Mother Church! Exult in glory! The risen Saviour shines upon you! Let this place resound with joy, echoing the mighty song of all God's people!

It is truly right that with full hearts and minds and voices we should praise the unseen God, the all-powerful Father, and his only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. For Christ has ransomed us with his blood, and paid for us the price of Adam's sin to our eternal Father! This is our passover feast, when Christ, the true Lamb, is slain, whose blood consecrates the homes of all believers.

This is the night when first you saved our fathers: you freed the people of Israel from their slavery and led them dry-shod through the sea. This is the night when Christians everywhere, washed clean of sin and freed from all defilement, are restored to grace and grow together in holiness.

This is the night when Jesus Christ broke the chains of death and rose triumphant from the grave.

Father, how wonderful your care for us! How boundless your merciful love! To ransom a slave you gave away your Son. O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a Redeemer! The power of this holy night dispels all evil, washes guilt away, restores lost innocence, brings mourners joy. Night truly blessed when heaven is wedded to earth and man is reconciled with God! Therefore, heavenly Father, in the joy of this night, receive our evening sacrifice of praise, your Church's solemn offering. Accept this Easter candle. May it always dispel the darkness of this night! May the Morning Star which never sets find this flame still burning: Christ, that Morning Star, who came back from the dead, and shed his peaceful light on all mankind, your Son who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

First Reading **Genesis 1:1– 2:2**

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was a formless void, there was darkness over the deep, and God's spirit hovered over the water. God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that light was good, and God divided light from darkness.

God called light "day", and darkness he called "night". Evening came and morning came: the first day. God said, "Let there be a vault in the waters to divide the waters in two." And so it was.

God made the vault, and it divided the waters above the vault from the waters under the vault.

God called the vault "heaven". Evening came and morning came: the second day. God said, "Let the waters under heaven come together into a single mass, and let dry land appear." And so it was.

God called the dry land "earth" and the mass of water "seas", and God saw that it was good.

God said, "Let the earth produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants, and fruit trees bearing fruit with their seed inside, on the earth." And so it was. The earth produced vegetation: plants bearing seed in their several kinds, and trees bearing fruit with their seed inside in their several kinds. God saw that it was good. Evening came and morning came: the third day. God said, "Let there be lights in the vault of heaven to divide day from night, and let them indicate festivals, days and years. Let them be lights in the vault of heaven to shine on the earth." And so it was. God made the two great lights: the greater light to govern the day, the smaller light to govern the night, and the stars. God set them in the vault of heaven to shine on the earth, to govern the day and the night and to divide light from darkness. God saw that it was good. Evening came and morning came: the fourth day.

God said, "Let the waters teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth within the vault of heaven." And so it was. God created great sea-serpents and every kind of living creature with which the waters teem, and every kind of winged creature. God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful, multiply, and fill the waters of the seas; and let the birds multiply upon the earth." Evening came and morning came: the fifth day. God said, "Let the earth produce every kind of living creature: cattle, reptiles, and every kind of wild beast." And so it was. God made every kind of wild beast, every kind of cattle, and every kind of land reptile. God saw that it was good. God said, "Let us make man in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves, and let them be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven, the cattle, all the wild beasts and all the reptiles that crawl upon the earth." God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.

God blessed them, saying to them, "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and conquer it. Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all living animals on the earth." God said, "See, I give you all the seed-bearing plants that are upon the whole earth, and all the trees with seed-bearing fruit; this shall be your food. To all wild beasts, all birds of heaven and all living reptiles on the earth I give all the foliage of plants for food." And so it was. God saw all he had made, and indeed it was very good. Evening came and morning came: the sixth day.

Thus heaven and earth were completed with all their array. On the seventh day God completed the work he had been doing. He rested on the seventh day after all the work he had been doing.

Second Reading Genesis 22:1-18

God put Abraham to the test, "Abraham, Abraham," he called. "Here I am," he replied. "Take you son," God said "your only child Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him as a burnt offering, on a mountain I will point out to you." Rising early next morning Abraham saddled his ass and took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. He chopped wood for the burnt offering and started on his journey to the place God had pointed out to him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. Then Abraham said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go over there, we will worship and come back to you." Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering, loaded it on Isaac, and carried in his own hands the fire and the knife. Then the two of them set out together. Isaac spoke to his father Abraham. "Father," he said. "Yes, my son," he replied. "Look," he said, "here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham answered, "My son, God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering." Then the two of them went on together.

When they arrived at the place God had pointed out to him, Abraham built an altar there, and arranged the wood. Then he bound his son Isaac and put him on the altar on top of the wood. Abraham stretched out his hand and seized the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven. "Abraham, Abraham," he said. "I am here," he replied. "Do not harm him, for now I know you fear God. You have not refused me your son, your only son." Then looking up, Abraham saw a ram caught by its horns in a bush. Abraham took the ram and offered it as a burnt offering in place of his son. Abraham called this place "The Lord provides", and hence the saying today: On the mountain the Lord provides. The angel of the Lord called Abraham a second time from heaven. "I swear by my own self – it is the Lord who speaks – because you have done this, because you have not refused me your son, your only son, I will shower blessings on you, I will make your descendants as many as the stars of heaven and the grains of sand on the seashore. Your descendants shall gain possession of the gates of their enemies. All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, as a reward for your obedience."

Third Reading Exodus 14:15 – 15:1

The Lord said to Moses, "Why do you cry to me so? Tell the sons of Israel to march on.

For yourself, raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea and part it for the sons of Israel to walk through the sea on dry ground. I for my part will make the heart of the Egyptians so stubborn that they will follow them. So shall I win myself glory at the expense of Pharaoh, of all his army, his chariots, his horsemen. And when I have won glory for myself, at the expense of Pharaoh and his chariots and his army, the Egyptians will learn that I am the Lord."

Then the angel of the Lord, who marched at the front of the army of Israel, changed station and moved to their rear. The pillar of cloud changed station from the front to the rear of them, and remained there. It came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel. The cloud was dark, and the night passed without the armies drawing any closer the whole night long.

Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove back the sea with a strong easterly wind all night, and he made dry land of the sea. The waters parted and the sons of Israel went on dry ground right into the sea, walls of water to right and to left of them. The Egyptians gave chase: after them they went, right into the sea, all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen. In the morning watch, the Lord looked down on the army of the Egyptians from the pillar of fire and of cloud, and threw the army into confusion. He so clogged their chariot wheels that they could scarcely make headway. "Let us flee from the Israelites," the Egyptians cried "the Lord is fighting from them against the Egyptians!" "Stretch out your hand over the sea," the Lord said to Moses "that the waters may flow back on the Egyptians and their chariots and their horsemen."

Moses stretched out his hand over the sea and, as day broke, the sea returned to its bed.

The fleeing Egyptians marched right into it, and the Lord overthrew the Egyptians in the very middle of the sea. The returning waters overwhelmed the chariots and the horsemen of Pharaoh's whole army, which had followed the Israelites into the sea; not a single one of them was left. But the sons of Israel had marched through the sea on dry ground, walls of water to right and to left of them. That day, the Lord rescued Israel from the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore. Israel witnessed the great act that the Lord had performed against the Egyptians, and the people venerated the Lord; they put their faith in the Lord and in Moses, his servant. It was then that Moses and the sons of Israel sang this song in honour of the Lord: I will sing to the Lord, glorious his triumph! Horse and rider he has thrown into the sea!

Fourth Reading Isaiah 54:5-14

For now your creator will be your husband, his name, the Lord of hosts; your redeemer will be the Holy One of Israel, he is called the God of the whole earth. Yes, like a forsaken wife, distressed in spirit, the Lord calls you back. Does a man cast off the wife of his youth? Says your God.

I did forsake you for a brief moment, but with great love will I take you back. In excess of anger, for a moment I hid my face from you. But with everlasting love I have taken pity on you, says the Lord, your redeemer. I am now as I was in the days of Noah when I swore that Noah's waters should never flood the world again. So now I swear concerning my anger with you and the threats I made against you; for the mountains may depart, the hills be shaken, but my love for you will never leave you and my covenant of peace with you will never be shaken, says the Lord who takes pity on you. Unhappy creature, storm-tossed, disconsolate, see, I will set your stones on carbuncles and your foundations on sapphires. I will make rubies your battlements, your gates crystal, and your entire wall precious stones. Your sons will all be taught by the Lord. The prosperity of your sons will be great. You will be founded on integrity; remote from oppression, you will have nothing to fear; remote from terror, it will not approach you.

Fifth Reading Isaiah 55:1-11

Thus says the Lord: Oh, come to the water all you who are thirsty; though you have no money, come! Buy corn, without money, and eat, and, at no cost, wine and milk. Why spend money on what is not bread, your wages on what fails to satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and you will have good things to eat and rich food to enjoy. Pay attention, come to me; listen, and your soul will live.

With you I will make an everlasting covenant out of the favours promised to David. See, I have made of you a witness to the peoples, a leader and a master of the nations. See, you will summon a nation you never knew, those unknown will come hurrying to you, for the sake of the Lord your God, of the Holy One of Israel who will glorify you. Seek the Lord while he is still to be found, call to him while he is still near. Let the wicked man abandon his way, the evil man his thoughts.

Let him turn back to the Lord who will take pity on him, to our God who is rich in forgiving; for my thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways are not your ways – it is the Lord who speaks. Yes, the heavens are as high above earth as my ways are above your ways, my thoughts above your thoughts. Yes, as the rain and the snow come down from the heavens and do not return without watering the earth, making it yield and giving growth to provide seed for the sower and bread for the eating, so the word that goes from my mouth does not return to me empty, without carrying out my will and succeeding in what it was sent to do.

Sixth Reading Baruch 3:9-15.32 – 4:4

Listen, Israel, to commands that bring life; hear, and learn what knowledge means. Why, Israel, why are you in the country of your enemies, growing older and older in an alien land, sharing defilement with the dead, reckoned with those who go to Sheol? Because you have forsaken the fountain of wisdom. Had you walked in the way of God, you would have lived in peace for ever. Learn where knowledge is, where strength, where understanding, and so learn where length of days is, where life, where the light of the eyes and where peace. But who has found out where she lives, who has entered her treasure house? But the One who knows all knows her, he has grasped her with his own intellect, he has set the earth firm for ever and filled it with four-footed beasts, he sends the light – and it goes, he recalls it – and trembling it obeys; the stars shine joyfully at their set times: when he calls them, they answer, "Here we are"; they gladly shine for their creator. It is he who is our God, no other can compare with him. He has grasped the whole way of knowledge, and confided it to his servant Jacob, to Israel his well-beloved; so causing her to appear on earth and move among men. This is the book of the commandments of God, the Law that stands for ever;

those who keep her live, those who desert her die. Turn back, Jacob, seize her, in her radiance make your way to light: do not yield your glory to another, your privilege to a people not your own. Israel, blessed are we: what pleases God has been revealed to us.

Seventh Reading Ezekiel 36:16-17a.18-28

The word of the Lord was addressed to me as follows: "Son of man, the members of the House of Israel used to live in their own land, but they defiled it by their conduct and actions.

I then discharged my fury at them because of the blood they shed in their land and the idols with which they defiled it. I scattered them among the nations and dispersed them in foreign countries. I sentenced them as their conduct and actions deserved. And now they have profaned my holy name among the nations where they have gone, so that people say of them, 'These are the people of the Lord; they have been exiled from his land.' But I have been concerned about my holy name, which the House of Israel has profaned among the nations where they have gone. And so, say to the House of Israel, 'The Lord says this: I am not doing this for your sake, House of Israel, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. I mean to display the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned among them. And the nations will learn that I am the Lord – it is the Lord who speaks – when I display my holiness for your sake before their eyes. Then I am going to take you from among the nations and gather you together from all foreign countries, and bring you home to your own land. I shall cleanse you of all your defilement and all your idols. I shall give you a new heart, and put a new spirit in you; I shall remove the heart of stone from your bodies and give you a heart of flesh instead. I shall put my spirit in you, and make you keep my laws and sincerely respect my observances. You will live in the land which I gave your ancestors. You shall be my people and I will be your God.'"

New Testament Reading Romans 6:3-11

You have been taught that when we were baptised in Christ Jesus we were baptised in his death; in other words, when we were baptised we went into the tomb with him and joined him in death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father's glory, we too might live a new life.

If in union with Christ we have imitated his death, we shall also imitate him in his resurrection.

We must realise that our former selves have been crucified with him to destroy this sinful body and to free us from the slavery of sin. When a man dies, of course, he has finished with sin. But we believe that having died with Christ we shall return to life with him: Christ, as we know, having been raised from the dead will never die again. Death has no power over him any more. When he died, he died, once for all, to sin, so his life now is life with God; and in that way, you too must consider yourselves to be dead to sin but alive for God in Christ Jesus.

Gospel Matthew 28:1-10

After the sabbath, and towards dawn on the first day of the week, Mary of Magdala and the other Mary went to visit the sepulchre. And all at once there was a violent earthquake, for the angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled away the stone and sat on it. His face was like lightning, his robe white as snow. The guards were so shaken, so frightened of him, that they were like dead men. But the angel spoke; and he said to the women, "There is no need for you to be afraid. I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said he would. Come and see the place where he lay, then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has risen from the dead and now he is going before you to Galilee; it is there you will see him.' Now I have told you." Filled with awe and great joy the women came quickly away from the tomb and ran to tell the disciples. And there, coming to meet them, was Jesus. "Greetings," he said.

And the women came up to him and, falling down before him, clasped his feet. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers that they must leave for Galilee; they will see me there."

Meditation

Do not be misled by the seeming complexity of tonight's celebration. At its core it is as simple and as basic as human life. A community gathers to initiate new members. New children will be born into this family. They will come forth from the womb that is the font. Life will rise again from the water. All new members are introduced into a community by learning and sharing the community's stories. The new members must become part of these life-giving stories. We must recount the critical events which have made us a people. To tell the stories we must have light. Fire must burn

and candles be lit so that the readers and singers and musicians and dancers that we are can relive the stories. Finally, these new members must share the community's food. Human social life began with the active sharing of food. To share food was and is to share life. Those who would share the life of this community must eat at our table. So we have light, texts, water and food. Rather we have illumination, storytelling, bathing and the meal. We are shaped by what we do more than by the things we use in doing these critically important deeds. In the midst of darkness we keep watch until the light of Christ breaks through. Keeping watch we support and encourage one another with stories of God's wondrous promises and his deeds which far surpass those promises. Newly alive with the excitement of God's power, we bring new members through the waters which save.

Then all of us come together to share that which we are, the Body of Christ. As we take leave a new dawn is lighting up the world. In accord with ancient tradition, this night is one of vigil for the Lord (Ex 12:42). The night vigil is arranged in four parts:

- a) a brief service of light;
- b) the liturgy of the word, when the Church meditates on all the wonderful things God has done for his people from the beginning;
- c) the liturgy of baptism, when new members of the Church are reborn as the day of resurrection approaches; and
- d) the liturgy of the eucharist, when the whole Church is called to the table which the Lord has prepared for his people through his death and resurrection.