

Easter Vigil Homily 2021

“When the sabbath was over, Mary of Magala, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, brought spices with which to go and anoint the Him.” The sabbath was over as soon as the sun set on Saturday night, and the women, it seems, immediately rushed out to buy the spices they needed, before going out at the first sign of dawn to anoint the body of their dead Lord. They may have spent a large part of the night buying and preparing everything they needed. That was their vigil. Little did they know that, as they worked, the Lord was already rising from the tomb, having conquered death, and now beginning to live the new life of the resurrection.

Tonight we have kept our vigil, listening to the Old Testament as we awaited the resurrection. We cannot be sure of the exact moment when our Lord rose: we simply know that it was sometime between dusk on Saturday and dawn on Sunday: the time in which the women worked; the time in which we keep vigil. The Exsultet, that magnificent and beautiful prayer reserved for this night alone, speaks of this: “O truly blessed night”, it proclaims, “worthy alone to know the time and hour when Christ rose from the underworld!”

And so, it was night when our Lord rose from the dead. Light burst forth into darkness. How many times the Exsultet speaks of this: “Let all corners of the earth be glad, knowing an end to gloom and darkness”; “let Mother Church also rejoice, arrayed with the lightning of His glory”; “This is night of which it is written, ‘Dazzling is the night for me, and full of gladness.’”

This moment – light bursting forth into darkness – is so powerfully experienced in this liturgy. Having waited, kept vigil, in the darkness, light bursts forth. We feel the light of the risen Lord dispelling darkness all around us. He has confronted all that is dark: suffering, sin and death, and His light has triumphed. Perhaps this year, when the lights went on, the sanctuary looked especially bright to you. That’s because of some new lighting, installed only a couple of weeks ago. You might also have noticed that the new spotlight on the cross leaves a huge shadow behind – I hope to get that tidied up at some point! But in the meantime, perhaps we can learn something from it. In a sense, the light of the resurrection means that the cross of Jesus – so vivid an image for us yesterday – has become a mere shadow. Shadows, of course, only exist where there is light. If Jesus had not risen from the dead, the world would have forgotten His crucifixion a very long time ago. But because of the light of the risen Lord, the shadow of the cross, the memory of the cross, continues.

We need the Cross – we need to look upon it to see the love and the mercy of our Lord; we need it so that we can know His closeness to us in times of suffering. But if only look at this shadow, and do not notice the light, we miss the point. Jesus has conquered. He is victorious. He is risen, He lives in glory; He casts His light over our world, and over the life of every believer.

To appreciate more deeply the meaning of the resurrection, let's listen to what the Exsultet teaches us. "This is the night," it proclaims, "when Christ broke the prison bars of death and rose victorious from the underworld". The prison of death has been opened; the stone has been rolled away from the tomb. Death cannot contain Christ, or any of us. This victory of our Lord also means forgiveness and reconciliation: "this is the night when a pillar of fire destroyed the darkness of sin"; "the power of this holy night dispels wickedness, washes faults away, restores innocence to the fallen and joy to mourners, drives out hatred, fosters concord and brings down the mighty". A new order of peace, harmony and joy is breaking forth into the world. It begins with Jesus and continues in the lives of His followers.

The resurrection grants us the grace of conversion and new life in Christ: "This is the night that even now, throughout the world, sets Christian believers apart from worldly vices and from the gloom of sin, leading them to grace and joining them to His holy ones". Yes, on this night each year, many are baptised, set apart from the world as believers in Christ; as St Paul teaches tonight, dying to self with Christ and rising to a new life of faith. In a few moments, we will renew our baptismal promises, recalling our dying and rising with Him, and asking for a renewal of that grace.

Tonight is the night of the true Passover: "This is the night when once You led our forebears, Israel's children from slavery in Egypt". Now we are led from our slavery to sin and death, fulfilling the hopes of countless generations. Even creation itself is given meaning on this night, because when Jesus rises from the dead, a new creation begins.

In that new creation, we live not simply a mortal life, with all its ups and downs, its limitations and uncertainties. We live the life of the resurrection, the beginnings of the life of heaven, in which we are called to perfect union with God in love, and to live always motivated by love. "O truly blessed night, when things of heaven are wed to those of earth and divine to the human". The great feast of heaven, the wedding feast of the marriage between God and humanity, begins on this night.

The women who kept their vigil on that first Easter night had no idea of any of this. They simply knew grief and pain. They mourned and did what they could to show love by preparing the spices to anoint Jesus' body, to slow down its decomposition. But as they kept their vigil, the Lord rose, His Body very much alive and glorified; as they kept their vigil, the new creation began, the prison bars of death were shattered, heaven was wed to earth. And in truth, this night and always, it is the risen Lord who keeps vigil over us, watching over us with love and devotion, acting in ways we cannot expect or even grasp, leading us to a life beyond our imagining.

Fr Andrew

