

Homily: Easter Vigil, Holy Saturday, 11<sup>th</sup> April 2020

“The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light. On those who lived in a land of deep shadow a light has shone. You have made their gladness greater; you have made their joy increase.” These words of the prophet Isaiah are read each year at Christmas, at Midnight Mass, heralding the birth of Jesus. That night, for the first time in history, the Light of the World was made visible. He illumined our world. But Isaiah’s words seem no less appropriate tonight. We too have walked in darkness, and now we see a great light. This liturgy, more than any other celebration of the Church’s year, draws upon these images to help us understand what is happening.

We began in darkness: the darkness of a world without God, without faith; a world in which death has the last word. Into that darkness comes the risen Lord, symbolised by the Paschal candle, dispelling the darkness of sin, suffering and death, announcing the perpetual light which we all hope will, one day, shine upon us. The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light.

Over the centuries many people have tried to snuff out that light: many have tried to silence the Good News of the resurrection, many have tried to keep Jesus in the tomb. All have failed, and they will always fail, because Jesus is the light that the darkness cannot overpower. We see it wonderfully shown in the Gospel tonight: Pilate, at the request of the religious authorities, has placed guards at Jesus’ tomb to prevent anyone taking His body. He must remain dead, He must remain in the tomb. But Pilate’s guards are no match for God’s power: an angel of the Lord descends – His face like lightning, His robe white as snow – all is light. St Matthew tells us that the guards were so shaken, so frightened, that they became like dead men. It’s a wonderful irony! Those who tried to keep Jesus in the tomb appear like dead man, but the man who was actually dead has risen to the new, perfect, and glorious life of the resurrection. There’s a wonderful detail in tonight’s Gospel that tells us that the angel rolled away the stone, then sat upon it. No one will ever roll this stone back. The tomb will never be able to contain Jesus again, and no tomb, no grave, will be able to hold us for ever.

Back at Christmas, the angel who appeared to the shepherds told them: “I bring you news of great joy”. We may feel there is not much good news around at present. But wherever an angel comes, there is always news of great joy, because angels are messengers from God. The angel in the Gospel tonight comes to bring the Good News of the resurrection into a world sorely in need of hope. And this hope is the risen Lord Jesus. When the angel appeared, there was ‘a violent earthquake’, St Matthew tells us. The angel has earth-shaking news, an announcement that will literally rock the world! The world has been shaken, changed forever by the news of the resurrection.

There is a line we heard tonight in the Exsultet, the great Easter proclamation, which fills me with a sense of the drama of this night, and reminds me of this earthquake. It says, “Let this holy building shake with joy, filled with the mighty voices of the peoples.” The earthquake – the announcement of the resurrection – is to ripple through the centuries, so

that even today the mighty voices of people of faith, filled with joy, bring this earth-shaking news to our world. But this year, singing these words, I also feel a certain sadness, because this building is not filled tonight with the mighty voices of the peoples. Another phrase in the Exsultet stands out for the same reason: it describes the flame of the Paschal candle as “a fire into many flames divided, yet never dimmed by sharing of its light.” The light of this candle would normally be shared around the church, filling this place with its light, allowing the light of the risen Lord to illuminate each of us. It is a painful thing that we cannot physically come together to share this light. I think particularly tonight of so many people throughout the world, including in our own parish, who were due to be baptised or received into the Church on this night. Your time will come, and we look forward to welcoming you fully, with great joy, into the communion of the Church when we are able to gather again. The flame of faith is never dimmed by sharing of its light – the more it spreads, the more the light grows. And this brings joy to us all. Your sharing in our faith brings joy to us all.

For this reason, the Good News must always be shared; the light must always spread. The angel delivers the good news to the women – they must pass it on. “Go quickly, and tell the disciples,” the angel instructs them. Filled with awe and great joy, the women run off to tell disciples. And there, coming to meet them, is Jesus. There is something important here. Whenever we are filled with joy in our faith, whenever we desire to share it with others, we meet the risen Lord. He is present whenever the Gospel is heard with joy and proclaimed. Some of the most beautiful experiences of my life have been times of sharing my faith with others. Beautiful, because the risen Lord Jesus is present and active in those moments.

Perhaps that’s one of the reasons we find it hard that we can’t gather together at this time. We want to share with others; we want to share our Easter joy and our faith in the risen Lord. Before He died, Jesus quoted to His disciples some words of the prophet Zechariah, “I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered”; but He added, “But after my resurrection I will go before you to Galilee.” Now He makes good on His promise. There is a time for the disciples to be scattered, but at the resurrection they are gathered together again. We pray tonight that the risen Lord may soon gather us together in His presence.

At the end of the Exsultet, we prayed that this flame of faith, lit tonight, may be found still burning by the Morning Star. It’s a prayer that, when Christ comes, He will find us with our faith in His resurrection still strong. So may this flame continue to burn. May it burn in our hearts, even if it cannot be symbolised by candles tonight. And may it be found still burning within us when we gather together again. And then, when we are reunited in God’s house, may this holy building shake again with the joy of the resurrection, filled anew with the mighty voices of those who proclaim the praise of the risen Lord. Amen.

Fr Andrew

