



**Easter Vigil Homily
Saturday 11th April
Northampton Cathedral**

In our celebration this evening, God chooses to speak to us in a variety of different ways. There are narratives, stories which tell us what happened, for example ‘towards dawn on the first day of the week Mary of Magdala and the other Mary went to visit the sepulchre’. That’s not an idea, but a reference to a particular historical moment. This is the history of certain events, perhaps not at the forefront of most secular accounts of history, but events which speak to us as a people of faith, events which proclaim God’s abiding love for his people.

We have also heard deeply reflected insights into what these narratives mean for you and me today. And so for the apostle Paul, we are inserted into the reality of Jesus’ dying and rising through the Sacrament of Baptism.

And then there are psalms, songs of awe and wonder, praise and thanksgiving, music which is born in the hearts of those who have come to appreciate what God has done and is doing in our midst, even today.

Along with these different kinds of words, narratives, reflections and songs, God also reveals Himself to us through signs and actions, interventions in the unfolding history of the people He has called to worship Him in thanksgiving and expectation. I love the image of God, walking with His people on their Exodus journey, a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Do we experience the Lord in this way today, walking with us in our journey through the pestilence we are experiencing, moving forwards with trust in the Lord’s presence amongst us.

In all of these ways that God speaks to us, the focus is entirely on what the Lord is doing, and not so much on what we ourselves do. In fact, the Easter Proclamation, or Exsultet, has two statements about ourselves which are to my mind really quite challenging. The first is this, ‘O truly necessary sin of Adam, destroyed completely by the Death of Christ’. And the second follows it, again speaking of the original sin, ‘O happy fault that earned so great, so glorious a Redeemer!’ When we reflect upon the devastation caused by sin, how could we ever describe this as necessary or happy?

These words about what we have done and are doing, only make sense in the light of what God has done, saving words and actions offered to us today.

And so, after the long Old Testament years of waiting, God sent His own beloved Son in the weakness of our flesh and blood. Some early Christians could not accept that God made himself vulnerable in the manger crib as an infant, or indeed, that the divine could be connected with the barbarity of Calvary. And so they said, Jesus only *seemed* to be divine at those points. And yet, it is precisely the union of divine and human natures in Christ which makes our salvation certain.

I love these words of St Athanasius, ‘When the sun rises after the night and the whole world is lit up by it, nobody doubts that it is the sun which has thus shed its light everywhere and driven away the dark. Equally clear is it, since this utter scorning and trampling down of death has ensued upon the Saviour’s manifestation in the body and His death on the cross, that it is He Himself Who brought death to nought and daily raises monuments to His victory in His own disciples.’ (*On the Incarnation*, 29)

This evening then, and during the Easter Season which lies ahead of us, we want to reject any way of thinking which suggests that Jesus has not overcome sin and death. We will be reflecting on this mystery of faith, that Jesus truly did share in our human nature. And now, Jesus invites us to share in his divine nature, having risen from the tomb in his body and having ascended to the right hand of the Father in glory.

And so we hear the story of what happened, the historical unfolding of God’s rescue plan for his totally broken creation. This evening we heard the evangelist Matthew’s account of how Mary of Magdala and another Mary came to the tomb. What happened there was not part of our normal experience, but it didn’t put the women off, and in the next moment, they encounter the risen Jesus himself. Luke, another evangelist, has a different take on what happens when the women meet with the disciples of Jesus some hours later, ‘this story of theirs seemed pure nonsense, and they did not believe them.’

This is how many today receive the historical account of what happened on that first Easter Sunday morning. It seems pure nonsense.

So why do we believe it all, the historical events we celebrate in these days? I think the answer to that question lies with the experience described by the apostle Paul. Through our baptism, we are joined with Christ Jesus in his death, something has died within us. And then, by the Father’s glory, we share in Jesus’ resurrection, so that in the words of St Paul, ‘we too might live a new life.’

The historical narrative and the experience of faith for us are intertwined in this hour of Easter celebration. In a few moments, what happened at the tomb on that first day of the week, will meet with our experience of faith, hope and love in this particular moment of time, Easter 2020. And all this will take place when you and I renew our baptismal promises.

So let’s be clear about what will happen when we do this. Like myself, many of you are probably unable to remember our baptism as infants into Christ’s death and resurrection. And surely many of us are painfully aware of the many ways we have traded in our pure baptismal garment for something less, something which

will not endure into eternity. It seems to be a constant battle doesn't it, to embrace the Gospel in our daily lives.

This Easter time then, we all have an opportunity, us here in the Cathedral and yourselves at home, to say here and now, I turn my back on the father of lies, I reject his empty promises. I do not want to carry these burdens and wear these chains anymore! I want to live in the freedom of the Kingdom of heaven.

And it gets even better. The apostle Paul would be the first to tell us, this turning away from burdens and chains, this embracing of freedom is a pilgrimage journey in our lives. It does not happen immediately. But every journey begins with a step. And the step we are invited to take this evening is this, the same Holy Spirit who raised Jesus' dead body from the tomb, is at work in us when we ask the Father to show us His glory.

So turn to God our Father now, give thanks for the obedience and love of His beloved Son, Jesus, and may we have the grace to open our lives to the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit who wants to raise us to a new life. The Spirit Himself will make us monuments to the risen Lord's victory over sin and death.