

## LENT COURSE 2022

### Session 5 The Easter Vigil and why it matters

5 April 2022

#### Culmination of the programme

The Catholic Church sees the celebration of the Easter Vigil on the night between Holy Saturday and Easter Day (not 'Easter Saturday' which is a week later) as the culmination of the worshipping life of Christians: from what we call the 'Paschal mystery' the whole sacramental life of the Church flows. That's why this was the first thing to be reformed and renewed over seventy years ago in 1950. So it is also the climax of this programme - following on from our discussion of the sacrilegious war in Ukraine, as the Holy Father called it the other day, our review of the synodal process and our examination last week of the rest of Holy Week. Some general points to make:

- What is more important than listening to me is to try and actually come if you're here, or go to it in another church if you're away (I realise because Easter is late and at the end of the school holidays many families are away).
- Easter is about the victory of the Lord Jesus over death and destruction: we must experience our worship this Easter, more than ever, in the sad context of the suffering, sin and death in the world. Our Lord in his sufferings and death is closely united to those suffering from war - in Ukraine and many other parts of the world - and our worship at Easter is an affirmation that he has the last word, that sin and war will be overcome in the end.
- It's also a particularly important time to be united with our brothers and sisters in the Catholic Church all over the world, and with our Holy Father Pope Francis. Traditionally on Easter Day the pope gives a special blessing 'to the city and the world' (*urbi et orbi*); however much or little we manage to get to of our own ceremonies of Holy Week and Easter, I would urge you to watch the ceremonies on Youtube at which he presides, including the Easter Vigil. In this dark time he is the world's true teacher; but even many Catholics are not listening to what he says.
- This evening I will only give a brief sketch about the Easter Vigil - it's a big subject so you might want to read up further about its history and meaning.

#### Covid and other circumstances this year

I said last week that Covid and its after-effects, not to mention practical issues like the temperature of the church building, means that there are still some restrictions for our customary way of celebrating Holy Week and Easter. For the vigil this means that we won't have the full set of Old Testament readings which we are normally required to have (the third edition of the current altar missal strengthened its instruction about this); it will also be different this year because we have one adult being confirmed and received into the Church, but no baptisms; nor is there a party afterwards in the hall. Hopefully next year things will be different.

#### Historical background

We know more about how the Easter Vigil was celebrated in the early Church than about any other act of worship - some of our sources go back to the early second century, only a couple of generations after the New Testament. This is because Easter, the resurrection of Jesus, defined his

followers from the very beginning, and also because it was universally the case that it was at this ceremony on Easter night that new converts to Christianity were baptised, after some weeks of rigorous preparation. When after Vatican II the Church established what we call the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA) which has been tremendously important in this parish, it wasn't setting up anything new: it was restoring, very faithfully, what we know happened in the early Christian Church. What was also distinctive in the early accounts we have is that all is was celebrated by the bishop in his cathedral - at this stage there was one single act of worship for Christians in the whole city. We have tried to recapture this as well now: as you may know at the beginning of Lent each year all those to be baptised or received gather in our cathedral for what is called the *Rite of Election*, when the archbishop *chooses those wishing to be baptised* ('elects' them) and their names are enrolled in a book. Priests at the Easter Vigil act in the name of the bishop as the chief celebrant of the sacraments of initiation, using the oils blessed by him a few days before in the middle of Holy Week at the Mass of the Chrism.

The reforms to Catholic worship after Vatican II were motivated by two key ideas: the first was to restore Christian worship, enabling people more easily to understand what they are joining in, in ways that are inspired by what we know about how Christians worshipped in the early Church; and secondly, to help us be more effectively a *missionary Church*. So the restored Easter Vigil and the RCIA process are central to the enormous expansion of the Catholic Church in the last seventy years, particularly in Africa; since in western Europe we are now in a missionary setting again, it has to be central for us too. That is why this is so important.

So our sources show that the things we do at the vigil go back to the early Church - the anointing of those being baptised, the clothing in white garments, the new fire outside the Church, the Paschal Candle, the deacon's chant in front of the candle, the long Old Testament readings - they're 'given', and a rich part of our heritage of worship and shared Christian experience. This is one reason why the last two years have been so painful - particularly in this country two years ago when churches were closed completely. This ought to make us mindful this year of our brothers and sisters, particularly in places like Ukraine, who will find it difficult to celebrate Easter properly this year.

### **Going through what happens**

In my description now I will focus on what we have normally done here - though the last time it was done in the customary way was three years ago in 2019 - making some reference to what happens elsewhere; but by and large there is more consistency among Catholics about how the Vigil is celebrated, and, at least in relation to Anglicans, more that we share with other Christians. For Eastern Christians, both Eastern rite Catholics (e.g. the Ukrainian Catholic Church) and Orthodox the ceremony is also important, but it is somewhat more elaborate.

First issue is sometimes a problem in parishes: when do you have it? The missal says that 'the whole service must take place in the night', and that it should begin 'after nightfall', and this really means it should be when it is beginning to get dark. Here it's usually 8 or 830. You certainly can't do it at 6. In some places it is much later, or even so late, or rather early, that's timed to end at dawn. We should be prepared to be adventurous and realise that this is different from anything else we do: and people should make the effort, if it's important to them. If you want a short Mass, don't come!

Throughout history lighting fires has been a sign of solidarity and warning that something big is going to happen, as well as a source of warmth; so we begin outside the church with a fire which is

blessed by the priest. It should be a real and visible fire, around which the Christian community gathers. From this fire are taken coals for the incense, and also a taper to light the Paschal candle.

This candle becomes the symbol of Easter in the Church for the next year, in the body of the church and after that near the font. A new one every year, decorated with grains of incense, the Greek letters alpha and omega and the numbers of the calendar year. The victory of Christ over death at Easter I symbolised, again and again, by the imagery of light overcoming darkness: so the deacon leads the people of God into a darkened church - and *it needs to be really dark*. In all the ceremonies like this what is symbolised is the women searching for the body of Jesus in a darkened tomb: he is not here, he is risen! How this is done is important: first, just the lit paschal candle; then the candles of the people, gradually lit *from the candle, from the single light of Christ* (do not bring your own box of matches!). We show our oneness with each other by passing the light to each other, sharing light and warmth in this darkened world. You cannot exaggerate the visual power of this ceremony; you also have to experience it!

When we come in the deacon censes the candle and then sings the chant known as the *Exultet*. I tell my diaconate students that they need to see singing this is the highlight of their year and of their ministry; we provide singing classes to help them do it (it's a bit complex in a parish with three deacons). The text is very old and so is the plainchant music; the 2011 translation is a great improvement on the earlier one. It is rich in symbolism and rich language, uncharacteristic of much Roman liturgy - it talks at one point of the bees who have helped to make the wax of the candle. The candle is likened to the pillar of fire which leads the people of Israel out of Egypt. In St Edmund's our tradition is that very gradually during the chant the main lights in the church are gradually lit up.

The readings now follow. The missal says 'nine readings are provided, all of which should be read whenever this can be done, so that the character of the Vigil, which demands an extended period of time, may be preserved.' They tell the story of what we call salvation history - and because it's a rich story, full of so much meaning, the Church wants us to hear the whole thing, so I will assume for the purposes of this talk that you are listening to all of them; each reading is followed not only by a psalm but by a prayer. The first is part of the Creation account from Genesis, and then the account from Genesis of Abraham almost sacrificing his son Isaac, which leads to God's promise that he will be the father of a great nation. One reading you have to have whatever else you do is the account of the crossing of the sea by the people of Israel fleeing from the Egyptians from the book of Exodus. The crucifixion of Jesus and his resurrection happens at the Jewish feast of Passover (*pesach*), marking the people's deliverance from Pharaoh and the Egyptians, a narrative which many Ukrainians may see as a source of strength this year, so this dramatic story from chapter 14 is central to the Easter Vigil's 'story.' The fifth reading is the promise of a covenant and new relationship which God makes in Isaiah 55 - there's also here water imagery which points us forward to baptism. The prophet Baruch is one of the books you don't find in Protestant Bibles, and our next reading from this shows how God's moral law is a source of light for his people. The baptismal imagery is taken up again in the seventh reading from Ezekiel: God will pour water over his people to cleanse them, and give them a new heart.

In the old Easter Vigil rite, which began to be reformed in 1950, there were twelve Old Testament readings (known as 'prophecies'). The additional ones were part of the story of Noah from Genesis, the vision of dry bones from Ezekiel, the instructions about the Passover lamb from Exodus, the

story of Jonah, the final words of Moses from Deuteronomy and the story of the three young men in the furnace from the book of Daniel.

After the eight we sing the *Gloria* and the bells are rung for the first time since the evening of Maundy Thursday. Then we have a New Testament reading - St Paul's great vision of the resurrection from Romans chapter 6, and before the gospel we sing the word beginning with 'A' which I won't say now, for the first time since Shrove Tuesday.....and the gospel of the resurrection: this year, from Luke's gospel.

After the homily we bless the water which here has in the past been used for adult baptisms. This is an elaborate prayer which helps us understand how we are joined to the Lord's resurrection through our baptism. During the prayer the deacon is expected to plunge the candle in and out of the water, a very vivid and striking image. If baptisms happen they now take place at the font (some churches have constructed special pools in the floor to enable this to happen by total immersion, and very vividly. Here the adult leans over the font.) Normally here while they go off to put on their white garments the rest of us renew our baptismal promises and are sprinkled with the new water, as we do often especially in the Easter season. Then the new Christians come back before the altar; those to be received into the Church profess their faith and all of them are confirmed. Normally in the western Church young people are confirmed by a bishop; but at the Easter Vigil, and at some other times, a priest is delegated to do this. The Mass continues more or less as usual - the new Catholics make their First Holy Communion.

### **The Theology of the Easter Vigil**

The Easter Vigil is so rich and deep; I am just pinpointing some interesting theological aspects of what we will be doing a week on Saturday.

#### **(i) Passover and Liberation**

For the Church it is no accident that the crucifixion happened at *Pesach*. It's meant to be! The Passover was and is the narrative of the Liberation of the people of Israel, the Jews. At the outset the Easter Vigil has to help us understand the Jewish roots of Christianity and the continuing evil of Antisemitism in the world, not absent from the Church in some places; we also need to be aware of anti-Jewish sentiments in some early Christian theologians. We also have to be sensitive to danger of appropriating or stealing the Passover story: at the same time for Christians the Exodus, what is celebrated in Passover, points us to the Last Supper, to the Cross, to the Resurrection. Moreover the Liberation of the Jewish people provides a model for the Liberation we gain through Christ's victory. The whole tradition of Liberation Theology, emanating from Latin America in the late 1960s and so important in the whole life of the Church, has drawn strength from Exodus, from Passover. The Easter Vigil is at the heart of this. Liberation from sinfulness, liberation from all that dehumanises, liberation from the curse of war and violence.

#### **(ii) Resurrection**

The event of the resurrection, the finding of the empty tomb, is an event in history. The Lord is not simply raised from the dead; he is raised from a cruel and violent death, a death at the hands of soldiers, soldiers in a brutal empire, occupying the Holy Land. At the heart of the Church's

opposition now to the death penalty has to be our worship of a victim of a death penalty, of a cruel and barbaric way of killing, though maximum pain and torture. We're seeing so much violence in the world - and people saw a great deal in the Roman Empire of the time of Jesus - and the Resurrection is a victory over violence, cruelty and the official, judicial killing of an innocent man. If we understand Easter, if we understand the Easter Vigil, we see how what we do in Church can never, ever be a way of fleeing from the sufferings in the world. Therefore our celebrations have to be a source of hope for those who suffer so much in the world as a result of violence and war.

### (iii) Waiting

I have stressed the important of having all eight Old Testament readings in normal circumstances. It's a long period and it's meant to be. For once the Church makes us listen to a lot of Sacred Scripture: this is in line, ideally, with the special *Year of the Word of God* which we started just before the pandemic began two years ago. These readings tell the tale of salvation history, the waiting of God's people for the coming of the Messiah, for the Liberation which comes from Christ's victory, the triumph of Christ our Passover. The waiting while we listen to God's Word prepares us for St Paul's great outburst in Romans 6 and the gospel account of the finding of the empty tomb. The waiting is part of what the Vigil is about. In terms of the coming of God's kingdom, much of the waiting is still going on. We're still waiting for justice, waiting for an end to war and violence. We have had to learn patience about many things in the last two years: but we're waiting in so many ways.

### (iv) Baptism

Baptism is our celebration of common life in Christ - and at Easter we invite new converts into the Church through baptism and (if they're already baptised) being received into the Church and confirmed. This gives us strength and confidence: it also helps us understand what it means to be part of the wider family of the Catholic Church, bigger than this parish, bigger than the Archdiocese of Southwark, bigger than the Church in England and Wales, bigger than the Church in Europe. Celebrations of the Easter Vigil, other celebrations in Holy Week, are much more elaborate, exuberant and joyful in many other parts of the world than they are in England (for example, in Latin America and in Africa).

### (v) Mission

This leads to my final point. In our parish, along with the rest of the Catholic Church as we falteringly (perhaps) stagger out of the pandemic, and as we try to respond to the worsening horrors of war in the world, we are engaged mission which we're planning in the light of your synodal feedback. How do we all preach the Good News more effectively in the darkness of the world, the darkness of this country? What we celebrate in the Easter Vigil is central to this: we have in our parish an experienced and dedicated RCIA team; while it is not surprising that after the problems of the last two years we have this year only one person being received into the Church this Easter and no adult being baptised. We all have work to do as missionaries.

I hope this evening and this series have been helpful.

