

Easter Vigil A - Exsultet: The Proclamation of Easter

April 9, 2020

Happy Easter my dear brothers and sisters in Christ. Though we cannot gather together in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic this year, from the weeping and mourning of Good Friday ***“Behold the wood of the Cross, on which hung the salvation of the world. Come, let us adore.”*** to this most holy night, the great vigil of Easter, the mother of all Vigils, we can still be united to celebrate this Holy Night via live streaming. For ***this is the Passover of the Lord, in which, by hearing his Word and celebrating his Sacraments, we share in his victory over death.*** In this Vigil, there are nine readings, seven from the Old Testament and two from the New (the Epistle and Gospel), all of which should be read whenever possible. Nevertheless, the number of readings from the Old Testament may be reduced to at least three readings, both from the Law and from the Prophets. **However, never should the reading of Exodus (14:15-15:1 with its canticle) be omitted.** The celebration of the Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ is the fundamental event for our Christian community, just as the Passover/Exodus event was and is the fundamental event for the Jews. The events of the Triduum are closely tied to the stories of Passover/Exodus. That’s why the reading of the story of the Exodus cannot be omitted. Our Jewish friends don't just hold a memorial when they celebrate Passover. Rather, they take part in the saving acts of those events. In the same way, we Christians don't just hold a memorial of the Last Supper when we celebrate the Eucharist, but rather, Jesus becomes present for us in the bread and wine. For us Christians, we might ask ourselves tonight: ***“Why is this night so different from every other night?”***

It is a busy night for deacons. They do more than just proclaiming the Gospel and serve at Eucharist. Before the celebration of the Easter Vigil, the ceremonial lighting of the Paschal candle is one of the most solemn moments of the service and deacons play a part in it. A blazing fire is prepared outside the church. When the people are gathered there, the Priest approaches with the minister carrying the paschal candle. The Priest blesses the fire and then he lights the paschal candle from the new fire, saying: ***“May the light of Christ rising in glory dispel the darkness of our hearts and minds.”*** With the candle lit, the Deacon takes the paschal candle and processes into the church. The Priest and the people, all holding in their hands unlit candles join in. At the entrance of the church, half way of the church and finally just before the altar, the Deacon, standing and raising up the candle, sings: ***“The Light of Christ.”*** And all reply: ***“Thanks be to God”*** The Priest lights his candle from the flame of the paschal candle and the parishioners light theirs from the priest's. Then the Deacon places the paschal candle on a candle stand next to the ambo and his second additional service begins. **The Exsultet or Easter Proclamation**, the hymn of praise sung after the procession of the Paschal Candle is another service for Deacons. The hymn sums up why tonight is different from other nights. (Exsultet can be sung by priest or cantor if deacon is not available.) It starts with a joyful, spirit uplifting, faith reburning, hope and love restoring overture after 40 days of gloom and darkness:

“Exult, let them exult, the hosts of heaven, exult, let Angel ministers of God exult, let the trumpet of salvation sound aloud our mighty King's triumph! Be glad, let earth be glad, as glory floods her, ablaze with light from her eternal King, let all corners of the earth be glad, knowing an end to gloom and darkness. Rejoice, let Mother Church also rejoice, arrayed with the lightning of his glory, let this holy building shake with joy, filled with the mighty voices of the peoples.”

“This is the night, when once you led our forebears, Israel's children, from slavery in Egypt and made them pass dry-shod through the Red Sea. This is the night that with a pillar of fire banished the darkness of sin. 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. This is the night, when Christ broke the prison-bars of death and rose victorious from the underworld."

Perhaps we think of the Resurrection as having taken place on Easter morning. Actually, we don't know what time of day it was. However, as the Gospel (Matthew 28:1-10) tells us, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came "***as the first day of the week was dawning.***" It was dawn, and the tomb was empty; so it seems that it was sometime between dusk and dawn "***when Christ broke the prison-bars of death and rose victorious from the underworld.***" That's why the Easter Vigil is always celebrated after dusk. The Exsultet continues:

"O truly blessed night, worthy alone to know the time and hour when Christ rose from the underworld! This is the night of which it is written: The night shall be as bright as day, dazzling is the night for me, and full of gladness. The sanctifying power of this 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. O truly blessed night, when things of heaven are wed to those of earth, and divine to the human."

Think about it. "***It restores innocence to the fallen.***" How can that be? It's a long time since we have felt innocent, isn't it? In today's world, even the little children aren't allowed to keep their innocence for long. Just a glance at the evening news reminds us of that. Yet on this night, we are told, our innocence can be restored. And ***it brings joy to those who mourn.*** Who among us does not mourn tonight? We mourn for those we love but see no more, especially due to the pandemic; we mourn for the lost opportunities of our lives, for the sins that weigh us down. No matter what burden we carry with us this night, joy can be ours, because this night really is different from any other night. And finally, we are told that ***this night drives out hatred, fosters concord, and brings down the mighty.*** What an exchange that is! Pride and hatred have done enough damage in our lives, haven't they? Who needs them? Especially if we can trade them in, if we can just give them to God and receive peace and concord in their place. ***On this night, when things of heaven are wed to those of earth, and divine to the human.*** That is really what God offers us tonight. We are bound to the earth, but God invites us to be citizens of heaven. We may have wandered far astray, but God calls us to be reconciled. "Come home!" God says to us. Christ is risen! And we are delivered from the gloom of sin; we are restored to grace and holiness of life. And the beautiful finale of the Exsultet:

"Therefore, O Lord, we pray you that this candle, hallowed to the honour of your name, may persevere undimmed, to overcome the darkness of this night. Receive it as a pleasing fragrance, and let it mingle with the lights of heaven. May this flame be found still burning by the Morning Star: the one Morning Star who never sets, Christ your Son, who, coming back from death's domain, has shed his peaceful light on humanity, and lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen". The lit Paschal candle reminds us that Christ is risen indeed. This light of Christ come into the darkness of our world to give us hope for a greater future if we reverse our sinful ways by rising above the things that keep us entombed and imprisoned and become people of the resurrection. Let's all light a candle at home this night and let it shine continually to drive away all darkness, especially the pandemic we are facing. Let it be the light at the end of the tunnel. Let it be the undimmed light of faith and hope. **As Pope Francis said: Be not afraid!**

(For those brothers and sisters in Christ, including me who miss the Easter Proclamation, here is a link to the singing with music and lyrics:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVwuc_CNswY&feature=share)