St John's Newport and St Stephen's Providence

LENT LECTURES 2019

5. The Easter Vigil

We have almost reached the climactic point in our exploration of the liturgy of Holy Week but before we examine the Easter Liturgy itself we should pause awhile and look briefly at Holy Saturday. First, we should be clear about names. Whatever the stores might say, this day is not Easter Saturday- that name properly belongs to the Saturday after Easter, the Saturday in Easter Week. Today is Holy Saturday or Easter Eve and it is a day with a quality all its own. The introduction helpfully provided in the Church of England's *Common Worship* tells us that *"according to ancient custom there is no celebration of the Eucharist on Easter Eve. The orders of Morning and Evening Prayer offer adequate liturgical provision for the day."* On this day, the rubrics of the Roman Catholic order say, *"the Church waits at the Lord's tomb, meditating on his suffering and death. The altar is left bare and the sacrifice of the Mass is not celebrated."* The body of the Lord sleeps the sleep of death in the cold tomb but an ancient sermon for this day powerfully evokes another special character of this day on which took place the Harrowing of Hell:

> *"Today there is a great silence over the earth, a great silence, and stillness, a great silence because the King sleeps; the earth was in terror and was still, because God slept in the flesh and raised up those who were sleeping*

from the ages. God has died in the flesh, and the underworld has trembled. Truly he goes to seek out our first parent like a lost sheep; he wishes to visit those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. He goes to free the prisoner Adam and his fellow-prisoner Eve from their pains, he who is God and Adam's son. . . .and grasping Adam's hand he raises him up, saying Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light."

This is the imagery that informs the iconography of the Easter icon ubiquitous in the Orthodox world and now so popular in the West I like to think that George Herbert, the priest-poet of the Caroline Divines, saw just such an image, perhaps on a visit to Venice, in the mosaics of San Marco, inspiring him to write:

"Rise, heart, thy Lord is risen. Sing his praise
Without delayes.
Who takes thee by the hand, that thou likewise
With him may rise . . . "

The testimony of Egeria is that the Easter Vigil in Jerusalem was celebrated in exactly the same way as it was in her community back home in Spain. This is not surprising, the Easter Vigil is, in a way, the "mother of all services" and this ancient liturgy was offered in much the same way throughout the Christian world. It could be argued that early church buildings were designed first and foremost for the offering of this particular liturgy and so its structure and ceremonial was in part determinative for the future of Christian architecture. St

Augustine, preaching early in the fifth century, called the Easter Vigil, *"the mother of all sacred vigils when the whole world is committed to keeping a night watch."* He goes on, *"God speaks to us in the readings of his holy word. Let us speak to God in our prayers. If we listen in docility to his sayings, he whom we petition takes up his dwelling in our hearts."* The widespread impulse from the earliest times was for Christians to gather on this night and recall together the story of God's saving work. When this coalesced into a coherent liturgy, the Great Paschal Vigil consisted of twelve Old Testament readings which started with creation, ran through covenant, and redemption, and prophecy, and ended with the celebration of the Eucharist with its own New Testament lections. When baptism became closely linked with the Vigil, sometime in the late second or early third century, it came between the twelve readings and the Eucharist. The whole service probably began with the ceremonial lighting of the lamps, a custom borrowed from Jewish Sabbath practice. So there we have in embryo the rite with which we are familiar today: light; word; Baptism and Eucharist.

Before we look at the structure of the service as we now know it and examine each of its sections, three preliminary points of a general nature need to be made. First of all I want to remind you of something which has been the major theme of these lectures, that the Easter Vigil is the celebration of the whole mystery of redemption in its unity and integrity. In it we are celebrating the Christian Passover in its entirety. As is so often the case with the new Eucharistic prefaces in the new

Church of England *Common Worship* provision, the nub of the theology undergirding the celebration is to be found in the proper preface:

"It is indeed right . . . on this night of our redemption
to celebrate with joyful hearts
the memory of your wonderful works.
For by the mystery of his passion
Jesus Christ, your risen Son,
has conquered the powers of death and hell
and restored in men and women the image of your glory.
He has placed them once more in paradise
and opened to them the gate of life eternal.
And so, in the joy of this Passover,
earth and heaven resound with gladness . . . "

Secondly, it is good to be reminded of the nature of the symbolism used in the Holy Week ceremonies. Theatrical realism is avoided in a liturgy designed to *involve* and not just *impress*. Of course, done properly it often succeeds in being both extremely dramatic and wonderfully impressive, but this is never the main consideration. The symbols used are not directly representational but are rather fundamental biblical and sacramental archetypes and images – fire, light, water, oil, bread and wine. The liturgical symbol of the resurrection is not the Easter Garden, harmless though this is, nor the medieval Easter Sepulchre of the Sarum rite, it is rather the Paschal Candle whose symbolism is all the more powerful for being entirely non-representational. In the words of Dom Lambert

Beauduin, a great leader of the Continental Liturgical Movement of the early 20th century, the Paschal Candle is *"no mere accessory to the Vigil, but rather its hero, its principal personality."*

Thirdly, we need to accept that the Easter Vigil will never be able to achieve the same kind of popularity as the Midnight Mass of Christmas. It will always baffle those whose Christian commitment is minimal, and its symbolism will remain opaque for those who are indifferent to or ignorant of the background. To expect liturgical signs to speak to those who encounter them for the first time is to forget that they derive their meaning from the mystery of salvation. The liturgy of the Great Vigil can only speak to those who have already received the Word in their hearts. What is more depressing is the number of committed Christians who appear indifferent to the Vigil. Those who associate the resurrection of Christ with sunrise need to remember that the New Testament is silent as to the "moment" of the Resurrection. What happened very early in the morning ("towards dawn" or "as the sun was rising" or "while it was still dark") was the discovery of the empty tomb. In the Easter Vigil we do not have a celebration that attempts to capture the "moment" of the Resurrection but one that journeys with Christ on his Passover from darkness to light, from death to life.

And so to the service itself: the first section is a Service of Light. The congregation should gather outside the church building for the blessing of the New Fire. This is a blaze – large

or small, it does not matter which – traditionally lit from striking flint, in other words a spark from nowhere. This is a pre-Christian ritual, probably originating in Ireland and "baptized" by the Church but there are other resonances to be felt. In the ceremony of the new fire still observed in Jerusalem, the Bishop goes into the tomb of Christ, strikes a flint on the stone on which Christ's body lay, and from that spark is lit a flame which passes to every candle-holding member of the congregation. Historically, the Service of Light or *Lucernarium* evolved naturally from the Jewish domestic custom whereby the mother of the household brought in the lamp for the evening meal which ushered in the Sabbath and a blessing for God's gift of light was said over it. The ceremony was taken over by the Christian Church for use at a vigil service and it is from this background that one of the oldest hymns in our hymn books emerges:

"O gladsome light; O grace
Of God the Father's face,
The eternal splendour wearing;
Celestial, holy, blest,
Our Saviour Jesus Christ,
Joyful in thine appearing."

In recent times, with the adoption of new Office Books, in the Episcopal Church and more recently in the Church of England's *Common Worship - Daily Prayer*, Anglicans have experienced a revival of the *Lucernarium* – in Norwich Cathedral the rite is used on Sundays in Advent and, indeed, we broke new ground by celebrating it at the beginning of a broadcast Choral

Evensong a few years ago. In the unique context of the Great Vigil the *Lucernarium* developed over the centuries into the series of rich and powerful symbolic acts we now experience.

In the Easter rite celebrated in a cathedral, the Bishop blesses the fire, giving thanks to God for the blessings of his light, then marks the great wax pillar that is the Paschal Candle with the distinctive signs that mark it out as a powerful symbol Christ himself, crucified and risen. The sign of the cross traced on the candle identifies Christ as the beginning and the end, the Alpha and Omega, the Lord of time and eternity and the five grains of incense, piercing the surface of the wax, represent his glorious wounds by which we are saved. The Bishop then lights the candle from the fire with the prayer that the light of the risen Christ will banish all darkness – not just the darkness of the night but the interior darkness of hearts and minds.

Taking the lighted Paschal Candle, the deacon leads the gathered people into the empty and darkened church building. Three times he solemnly raises the candle and chants, "The Light of Christ" to which all reply "Thanks be to God." This new light, first piercing the darkness alone, is then passed from the Paschal Candle to the small candles held by the clergy and people. The ceremony of this solemn entry has many rich levels of meaning. First it looks back to the Exodus narrative, for it re-enacts the pilgrim procession of the Hebrews from the land of their servitude through the Red Sea to the Promised Land, led by the pillar of cloud and fire. In a few minutes time, in the

Exsultet, the deacon will proclaim: *"This is the night when you first saved our ancestors, freeing Israel from her slavery and leading her safely through the sea."* As the pillar of cloud and of fire was for Moses and his people a sign of the glory and guiding presence of Yahweh, so for us Christ is *the* Sign, *the* Sacrament, of God's presence and of God's glory. As the Prologue to St John's Gospel tells us, *"we saw his glory, the glory he has from the Father as only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth."* Moreover, from the same Prologue, he is *"the real light that gives light to everyone"* and so the symbol of light communicated from the Paschal Candle speaks powerfully of the radiance of the risen Christ. But the light also leads us deeper into another aspect of tonight's liturgy, the sacramental communication of the power of the Resurrection in baptism. Baptism is indeed an act of illumination, and the Greek word *photismos* is used to describe baptism from the time of Justin Martyr in the second century. The letter to the Hebrews addresses the baptized as those who have been *"brought into the light"* and have *"received the light"*. Later in the Easter Liturgy those who are baptized receive their own candles lit from the Paschal Candle and after Pentecost the Paschal Candle is permanently lodged next to the Font and used to light the baptismal candles throughout the rest of the year.

After the third acclamation, with all the candles held by the people now alight, the Deacon places the Candle in the great candlestick reserved for it, takes incense and censes it to pay honour to the symbolic presence of Christ it represents and

begins perhaps the greatest, most eloquent and lyrical liturgical chant of the whole year, the *Exsultet*. Sung to a unique melody, this wonderful piece of prose is of great antiquity. Both St Augustine and St Jerome bear witness to its use in the fourth century, St Jerome with a characteristically waspish remark about deacons showing off as they sing! It is a paean of praise to this the holiest of nights, cosmic in its scope, inviting heaven, earth, the universe, the whole of creation to rejoice and dance around God's throne as the blessings of the paschal victory are rehearsed. Even the bees are praised and thanked for the splendour of the candle flame as it is fed by the melting wax they prepared. And so it draws to an end:

"For Christ the morning star has risen in glory;
Christ is risen from the dead and his flame of love
still burns within us!
Christ sheds his peaceful light on all the world!
Christ lives and reigns for ever and ever!"

The second part of the Vigil, the Liturgy of the Word, comes immediately after the singing of the *Exsultet*. The high drama of the Service of Light gives way to the sober intensity of meditative reading. Each lesson is introduced by the Bishop and followed by a chant or anthem chosen to cast some light on its meaning. A collect offered by the Bishop completes each unit of scripture to which we respond with the *Amen* of faith. Because this service is in origin an all-night vigil and not something to be got through as quickly as possible, there were twelve Old Testament readings provided, all of which had to be read. Last

year when I was preaching and deaconing Holy Week in Philadelphia at a church which used the old rite, I sat through the whole series, rising after each lesson to go to the altar and pray the collect. I approached this with some trepidation, but I have to say that once the rhythm was established, the theological coherence of the chain of readings is gripping and the time passed very quickly. *Common Worship* provides twenty two from which to make a selection and suggests themes to pursue as pastoral circumstances dictate. A minimum of three must be read, one of which must always be the Exodus account of the Crossing of the Red Sea. Because many bishops very properly and appropriately wish to baptise and confirm at the Easter Vigil and a good number of candidates see the point of this and present themselves, they are often keen not to over extend the series of readings. In Norwich we read the bare minimum to retain the character of a vigil and Genesis 3 – the account of the Fall, Exodus 14 – the Red Sea crossing, and Ezekiel 36 – with its baptismal resonances are the chosen pericopes. How ever many are chosen, they should be read in a darkened church, in and by the light of the Paschal Candle, a powerful symbol of the truth that Scripture only fully reveals its meaning in the presence of the Risen Christ.

The next moment of drama comes after the last of the Old Testament readings. The Celebrant leads the Easter Acclamation and the *Alleluia*, absent from the liturgy since the beginning of Lent, triumphantly returns. The intonation to the *Gloria in Excelsis* is sung, bells are rung, the organ plays, the lights are

raised and the altar candles lit. After the Easter collect we hear the New Testament readings – the Epistle is always from Romans 6 and the Gospel is from the Synoptic account appropriate to the current year of the lectionary cycle. We are reminded of St Augustine's words, *"we are an Easter people and Alleluia is our song"* as alleluias acclaim the gospel reading – to ensure maximum congregational participation and because the words are so appropriate, at Norwich in my time we sang Sylvia Dunstan's wonderful hymn with its refrain of repeated alleluias:

"*This holy covenant was made:*
God our Deliverance was obeyed.
Seas were parted; freedom started.
By cloud and fire we were led.
By quail and manna we were fed."

The Liturgy of Initiation which follows - the third section of the Easter Liturgy – sets the pattern for all other services of baptism and confirmation throughout the year. I will not dwell on it here save to draw attention to the rich prayer of blessing over the waters of the font. This makes clear once again the connection between the passage of Moses and the people of Israel through the Red Sea from slavery to freedom and the passage of Christ through the deep waters of death to resurrection life and a new creation in which all may share. In this the font is imaged as the womb of Mother Church made pregnant by the risen Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit to bring forth children, and the liturgy is not afraid to make use of frankly sexual imagery when the Paschal Candle is plunged

three times, ever deeper, into the waters. Vitally, it is the whole assembly which renews its baptismal commitment with those who are to be baptised and confirmed. This is the point to which our whole Lenten observance has been leading. We are reminded that through the paschal mystery we have all been buried with Christ so that we may rise with him to new life within the family of the Church. We proclaim what we are in our very essence – we are the baptised, we reaffirm our rejection of evil and declare our intention to live as those who have been reborn to eternal life. It is appropriate that at this point we are all sprinkled with the waters of the font.

Finally, the Eucharist is celebrated. Every celebration is, of course, a paschal celebration, a celebration of the whole mystery of salvation in its inclusive unity and a fervent and expectant anticipation of the End Time. But on no other occasion are these characteristics realised with such clarity and force as in this one celebration during the night of Easter. It is this Eucharist which sums up the work of the Cross and the Sepulchre and celebrates them in the joy and light of the Resurrection. Here is recapitulated all that the *Triduum* means – Supper, Cross, Grave, Resurrection. This is emphatically not an eleventh-hour reversal of the defeat on Good Friday but the confirmation of a victory already won, the sign and seal of the Father's acceptance and approval of Christ's self-offering in his Passion. The Paschal Eucharist is "realised eschatology" par excellence – on one level it looks forward to an End Time still hidden in the future while on another is brings into the present

the reality and power of that anticipated fullness. *"What we hope for is the fullness of what we already possess in him. What we possess has its meaning only in the hope of his Coming."*

In these five lectures we have explored together the origins of the Holy Week rites of the Western Church in the sacred topography of 4th-century Jerusalem and in that exploration have met and I hope made friends with both the nun Egeria and St Cyril, the Bishop of that important city. We have looked at the ancient scripture choices which still inform our lectionary today. We have looked at the reform of these rites at various times in Christian history but most particularly at the reforms which have shaped our worship today. I have tried, also, to encourage you to ponder the theological undergirding of our celebration of the Paschal Mystery so that, reflecting on Christ's atoning work and God's unceasing mercy and love, you may the better offer your worship, your sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, when the time comes.