

## THE SYMBOLS OF EASTER NIGHT

Genesis 1.1-2.4a; Exodus 14.10-15.1a; Isaiah 55. 1-11; Zephaniah 3. 14-20;  
Romans 6. 3-11; Matthew 28. 1-10

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

Those of you who like theatre may have had the opportunity to attend a performance of what are called the *Wakefield Mystery Plays*. Originally, the plays were a series of thirty-two plays<sup>1</sup> based on the Bible; and they were performed around the Feast of Corpus Christi in the town of Wakefield, England during the late Middle Ages until 1576.

However, more recent productions of a modern version of the plays have been organised; and one of my friends saw such a production in Wakefield Cathedral four years ago. He told me that in the cathedral, the stage for the plays was built on two levels. The upper part, which was bathed in light, was the place of truth where the great works of God's glory were acted out. The lower stage was in darkness; and it was a place of betrayal and untruth, suffering and death. One of the more dramatic moments of the play occurred at its conclusion: after our Lord was nailed to the Cross on the floor of the dark, lower stage, the Cross was then hauled into an upright position, and as my friend saw Jesus being lifted up on the Cross, it broke through into the light of the upper level.

In this simple portrayal of the crucifixion of Christ, we can grasp the heart of the mystery of our redemption: that crucifixion can lead to glorification, and that suffering and death lead to resurrection. Curiously, it is often hard for us to

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<sup>1</sup>Mediaeval mystery plays focused on the representation of Bible stories in churches as tableaux with accompanying antiphonal song. They told of subjects such as the Creation, Adam and Eve, the murder of Abel and the Last Judgement. Often they were performed together in cycles which could last for days. The name derives from mystery used in its sense of 'miracle', but an occasionally quoted derivation is from the Latin word *ministerium*, meaning craft, and so the 'mysteries' or plays were performed by the craft guilds.

understand the basic truths of our redemption. It is as if we need to have them acted out, as it were, before our eyes.

Tonight, in the symbols and symbolic actions of the sacred liturgy of the Great Vigil of Easter, you and I have another way to enter into the drama of our redemption.

We begin with the lighting of the new fire, from which comes light. Light is a powerful natural symbol that speaks to us of happiness and life. Perhaps this is because light is also an element of creation. Light banishes fear and restores order in the chaos of the night. We all look forward to the long evenings of summer and yearn to feel the warmth of the sun on our backs. Scientists tell us that light banishes depression and makes us feel well and healthy.

Darkness, on the other hand, is no friend, except to the forces of evil. Under the cover of night, we do the things that we would be ashamed of in the daylight. It is not only children who are afraid of the dark! However in history, God has used the night for his own purposes. The Israelites were led out of captivity during the night. Nicodemus came to see our Lord by night and was given the possibility of another kind of liberation: entering into the kingdom of God.

In the midst of our darkened church, the Easter Candle symbolises Jesus who is the Light of the world; and as that Candle is lit, we praise the One who is the victor over sin and death. Symbolically, the resurrection event of more than two thousand years ago is translated into our present time and remembered. As we see the light of this Candle conquering the surrounding darkness, something of the resurrection takes place afresh.

Water is also a significant symbol in the Great Vigil of Easter. It is, like light, an element of creation. Water can be both a symbol of life and death. In our Old

Testament reading, we were reminded of how God parted the waters of the Red Sea so that the Israelites could be freed from exile; but also how that same water became the means of death by drowning for the pursuing Egyptians.

After this homily is over, we will encounter water as a symbol of cleansing, forgiveness and new life. The Easter Candle will be carried in procession to the baptismal font; and there, after we have all renewed our baptismal promises, we shall receive the blessings offered to us through the sprinkling of holy water.

But allow me to finish with another symbol of a very different kind that takes pride of place this Easter night: and that is the word 'Alleluia'. If there is one word that characterises our Easter celebrations, it is this.

Throughout Lent, we have refrained from using this word, just so that we could joyfully say (and sing!) it tonight. Before the *Gloria* was sung, the priest said the Easter Acclamation ('Alleluia. Christ is risen'), to which we all responded, and with great joy: 'He is risen indeed. Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia'! Prior to the gospel reading, 'Alleluia' was sung back and forth three times by the priest and the congregation; and the word will be said again at different parts of the Mass before we depart. This 'Alleluia' permeates the whole of our Easter celebration; it gives it its character and its mood.

But just what does it mean, this 'Alleluia' that expresses our celebration of our Lord's resurrection from the dead? The word does have a meaning: it comes from a Hebrew word that means 'praise the Lord'. However Christian tradition has not translated it, leaving instead the sound that obviously lies behind the Hebrew word for 'praise'.

Tonight, as we celebrate the fact that Jesus has risen again from the dead, we cry ‘Alleluia’. Christ has proved stronger than death, that final, common enemy of the whole human race. But the joy of the resurrection also means that you and I can have life *now*, and have it abundantly.<sup>2</sup>

Dear friends, Alleluia! Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed, Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Jn 10. 10