

The Easter Vigil

This is the Night

We began our reading of Scripture tonight with the story of Creation, where God separated light from darkness. We have always known that, despite the brightness of the noon, the powers of darkness are always waiting to repossess the Creation. Night has always been our vulnerable time, our time for tears and loneliness, our time of temptation and doubt. The Church calls us together on this night with quite different purpose.

It's true that, somewhere between two and three in the morning, our human powers and strength normally reach their lowest point. We may think that this was the lowest point of devastation reached by the members of that scattered company which had been together at the Last Supper on Thursday evening. In just this time the Christian faith was born. This is the night on which God broke the grasp of death.

On Ash Wednesday, when we accepted the dust on our foreheads, we acknowledged the reign of death over us. During Lent, we have not stood still in this knowledge, but by prayer and fasting and works of goodness we have worked against it, so far as we were able. I don't need to ask how well *you* succeeded in dispelling the power of darkness. To pit our strength against it is so often a futile and disappointing experience – so much so that many people do not even try; they relax into its grip and become morally invalid, spiritually disabled, religiously agnostic. It is the modern sin – apathy: a sin which sounds like weakness, but which is deadly. The whole of Lent is an effort to make us feel our need for a stronger arm than ours, to help us to know our need for salvation.

Now God brings us to the Sepulchre in the darkness, because it is when we tread this path, where no apathy would bring us, that we make the encounter which founds our hope for life. Tonight we remember how personal salvation is. It is not an earthly happiness which compensates us; far from trying to cancel the meaning of our wounds and losses, it glorifies them. In our worst moments, we dream of a salvation which plucks us out of the messy life we have lived, and wafts us into the blue yonder where we lose our past in happy oblivion, and inherit some fund of future glad experiences, like lottery winners. The brute facts of this glorious feast are a powerful antidote to *that*. It is a feast made of crucifixion, and a baying crowd, of scheming politicians and false friendship, despair and flight, a hurried burial in the twilight, and a heavy stone rolled over the mouth of a cave, while all come sorrowfully away. On this feast-day everyone wakes to a reality which has them in tears, that awakening which only the freshly-bereaved understand. It is because we bore the verdict of Ash Wednesday in its stark realism, because we heard the call to fast, that we can count ourselves invited to this feast. It is because of our community with the poor that we can get in to its banquet. It is through our thoughtful prayer that we learned the way to come, and kept our eyes fixed on the one who guides us. All of this brought us far from the spirit of festival, through the darkest of paths: and this teaches us that we are not here to pool our earthly resources, and snatch at the shreds of earthly optimism or warmth. Instead, we are to inherit a new gift of Creation, far surpassing what we ever knew before, a gift that will speak to our deepest needs. Easter is no partial or palliative remedy. It is a total joy which consecrates what God is to us, and what we are to God, and makes us eternal and divine.