

Easter Vigil

I wonder what you would say about the last six weeks. Have they been unusual in any way? They have made up the season of Lent, they have covered the slow escapement of the globe as it tips us Northerners back towards the light, the daffodils have sprung and the blossom has - just - popped its buds. Some of us have lost a little weight and spent a little less on food and drink. We have prayed a little more, come to Mass a little more, and we have tried to give more to others.

For some of us it has not been ordinary time, but a time of unforgettable struggle and hardship; we have celebrated funeral masses during this Lent for beloved fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers. Some families have crossed new frontiers in their knowledge of bereavement, and for them this Easter night that *brings mourners joy* comes as a promise of peace and consolation they may not yet feel. It has been a time when people have risked their lives in hospital, undergoing life-saving surgery. There have been new births, and people have been contemplating their weddings. Suffering and joy mingled together are always present to the Body of Christ. But on this night it is true above all others.

When someone I love is suffering, I long to bring them healing and consolation. I'm looking for something the Psalmist asks from God: *Give us joy, to balance our affliction*. But Easter isn't like this at all. The affliction was all there on Friday afternoon, not as a bitter pill to swallow on the way to joy, but as the Way itself. Easter comes, not with a trivial rubbing-out of the bitter past, but in deepest relationship with what happened on Good Friday. The Risen One assures us it is He by showing us his wounds, the wounds that carried him into the grave.

The night of Easter brings together the defeated humanity we saw in Jesus crucified, *and in those who crucified him*, and the new kind of triumphant humanity we meet in the Risen Lord. God is doing something much more beautiful, much more important, than calming us down and offering a new beginning to an old game. He is exalting all his defeated people to a quite new place of honour, where his eternal love glorifies them - makes them divine. Jesus the Man has faithfully carried out the mission he was sent to accomplish. The perfection of his human response to God has shown us what we were made for, and what (with the grace of God) we are going to be .

Now there follow seven days of the most excellent festival we can manage. The Easter Octave must be a week when every day is the Eighth Day Of Creation, a new day of joy and fulness. It is only the beginning of seven-times-seven days of Eastertide, where we try to unwrap the gift, as it were, and lay hold of the new life that he holds out to us. For those who can show the marks of the cross on their body - the bereaved, the suffering, the defeated - this is the time when his promises can come true. This is no lottery-win, restoring earthly fortunes and offering a brief respite from this or that uncomfortable fact. Nor is it like the gift Lazarus knew, who was called back from the grave only to die again later.

This Easter gift takes all the agony of the world and recognises in it the royal road that leads to divine life, where the Father and the Son eternally and totally give themselves in the Holy Spirit, and where we can dare to give our whole selves like them, and in return be swept into the glorious freedom of the Children of God. Let us not lose time seeking peace in the perfection of our earthly projects and schemes, however good and necessary they may be. Instead, let us move into the spaciousness of a Paschal mansion, where the roof is opened to a new heaven, and where the earth can be known as a theatre of God's healing surgery. Our human life will not be harmed by its Shepherd, who comes to us from the grave *so that we may have life, and have it in its fulness*.