

Reflections for the Easter Vigil Service

WELCOME

Good evening and a warm welcome to our Easter Vigil service, which this year we are celebrating together in our own homes.

It is a privilege and a joy to be able to spend this time with you.

PARALLELS BETWEEN THE EASTER STORY AND THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Our Easter Vigil service begins in the dark – the cold and austere darkness of the tomb of Jesus Christ. We might say that as our service begins, we are joining Mary Magdalen. We are walking with her towards the tomb of Jesus Christ.

It is before dawn, and Mary Magdalen is walking in great confusion and pain at the sudden loss of so much, the loss of her bearings.

Mary has come out at night because she is frightened to be out of her home. All the disciples have locked themselves away, ‘for fear’, the Bible tells us. They fear that the forces which have carried off their Master so violently will come after them too.

Already, we can see – perhaps to our surprise – that this extra-ordinary moment in the lives of the first disciples of Jesus speaks directly to us in the health emergency which faces us.

For there are a surprising number of parallels between the situation of Mary and the other disciples, in those days following the death of Jesus, and our difficult circumstances today.

Across the world today, life has transformed for most of us, and the future feels less certain. Like the disciples in the days following the crucifixion, we all feel today some measure of shock and loss, fear and uncertainty. This parallel holds particularly truly, perhaps, for those who are unwell and for those who love them.

Across the world today, there are key workers, volunteers and many others who are serving

others in this crisis. Like Mary Magdalen, many people are leaving the relative safety of their homes at this time in order to serve others.

Across the world today, people are closing the door of their homes and going out as seldom as possible. Lockdown is difficult for everyone. For many, however, it is much more difficult, even desperate. Like the disciples in those first days following Jesus' death, there are many people today who are living out these days of lockdown in very cramped conditions and with few means.

So this Easter, the first thing to say is that God wants us to bring to our prayers all of the challenges faced by us and by others. Let us bring to God our particular situations today, whether good or bad.

Let us commit to bring to God in the coming days our fears and apprehensions. Let us commit, also, to praying for the welfare of key workers and volunteers, and the welfare of the people they are serving.

Let us commit to praying in these days for the particular difficulties faced by all those for whom social distancing or self-isolation brings danger or hardship or poverty – and for all those who woke up this-morning feeling desperate.

And if you woke up this-morning feeling desperate I want you to know that there are people who are praying for you today.

REFLECTIONS ON THE SERVICE OF LIGHT

Our service – this awesome service of vigil and prayer which we are about tonight – this service looks death square in the face. It begins in darkness and isolation.

But then we are invited to gather round a fire, the light and warmth of life, symbolising the message of the Resurrection.

This is the service about which Her Majesty The Queen spoke in her Easter message. Light passes from one person to another, like the good news of the Christ's Resurrection.

What news this is! The Resurrection of Christ tore the very fabric of creation. In its light the whole universe – not just our world – the whole universe is become a different place.

This is news which has caused the generations of Christians before us to sing for joy. It will bring as yet unborn generations to sing for joy. Tonight, in our generation, a Deacon sings the message of the Resurrection for us.

Rejoice, heavenly powers! Sing, choirs of angels! O Universe, dance around God's throne! Jesus Christ, our King, is risen! Sound the victorious trumpet of salvation! (Common Worship: The *Exsultet*)

REFLECTIONS ON THE VIGIL OF READINGS

We sit together in this candlelight – as in the transforming light of Christ's Resurrection – and we listen to readings from the Old Testament. As our eyes adjust to the light of the Resurrection, we begin to see how the

whole message of the Bible, the whole history of God's People, has been leading to the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The whole history of God's people has been preparing us for this moment two thousand years ago, when God as man suffered for us and died for us and rose for us.

And it is also true that as our eyes adjust to the light of the Resurrection, we begin to see how the message of Easter offers us new ways to live, new ways to be ourselves in the future.

We might sum this up by saying that the new and eternal life which Jesus offers to share with us at Easter is both gift and challenge.

HUDDLING AROUND THE RISEN, WOUNDED BODY OF OUR LORD

‘When I am lifted up from the earth,’ Jesus said, ‘I will draw all people to myself’.

Here there is immeasurable gift. Jesus offers to each of us the opportunity to live our lives next to him, as part of his entourage. We gather around the risen Christ and we see to our amazement that he has allowed our names to be carved into his hands and his feet and into his side.

His very body is marked forever with the marks of his love for you. Here is the gift of God to you.

But there is also challenge here. For if the risen Christ is drawing us to himself, then this will inevitably mean that he is drawing us closer to

one another too. As we gather around Christ, we discover that we are huddling together with the rest of humanity whom Christ is calling to himself and whose names we can also read carved into his glorious, wounded flesh.

LIVING AS PARTS OF CHRIST’S RISEN, WOUNDED BODY

Social solidarity is not an add-on or a ‘nice-to-have’ for Christians, then. It is a necessary aspect of a Christian life.

St Paul makes this same point. He uses even an more arresting analogy. Paul teaches that, yes, we Christians huddle together around the risen body of Christ. More than that, Paul teaches us, Christ offers to makes us members, or parts, of his glorious, wounded, risen body.

And then, Paul draws out the consequences of this. As in any human body, Paul tells us, ‘if one

part of the body is suffering, all the parts suffer together with it'. When Jesus invites us to become part of his body, he is inviting us to a life of compassion – to laugh with those who laugh, and to suffer with those who suffer.

Here is the challenge of the Christian life.

EASTER AND THE CALL TO SOCIAL SOLIDARITY

As our eyes adjust to the light of the Resurrection, we begin to see how the message of Easter changes the way we should be living together.

Christ calls us to social solidarity with others, and most especially with those who are suffering.

This is surely a message for today. And we can see this message being lived out in the lives of

many people – people of different faiths and of no faith at all.

- Consider the daily cost of social distancing or self-isolating being borne by so many people without complaint, and the unsung ways that so many people are finding to care for others in this new circumstance.
- Consider more deeply the sacrificial love which has allowed so many key workers to continue to serve others, even though this sometimes involves putting themselves in harm's way.
- Consider the millions of people across the world who in the past few weeks have volunteered to work with charities and other organizations serving others, and those new people who are volunteering for the first time each day.

HOW CAN EACH OF US SERVE OTHERS AT THIS TIME?

This-evening I renew my invitation to every member of our church family to consider again: how can you serve others at this time?

- For us all, serving others will mean seeing social distancing (and, where appropriate, self-isolating) as a religious obligation.
- For us all, too, it will mean carving out more time to pray for others, and to seek ways to be quietly proactive in serving others.
- For some, it means continuing to serve others as 'key workers'.
- And for some, if your health and circumstances allow, it will mean volunteering to work with charities and other organizations.

You can find on our church website a range of prayer resources. And you can find there too information about some of the different ways in which you can volunteer; and you'll find encouragement too.

When Jesus is lifted up from the earth he draws all people to himself. And this means that those who are drawn to the risen Christ find that they are drawn closer to others – and particularly drawn closer to those who are in need. This is a message for now.

Please God, it will also be a message for the difficult days which will follow the medical crisis, when more of the wider and longer-term cost to our society begin to take centre-stage.

WORD AND SACRAMENT AS MEANS OF GRACE

This evening, in our homes, we shall together celebrate this wonderful act of worship: the service of light and then the vigil of readings.

Then in tomorrow's online service we shall celebrate the second part of the Vigil service, as we renew our baptismal promises and celebrate the Eucharist.

Tonight we gather with the Risen Christ and read the Bible with him. He shows us once more how the whole of the Bible points towards his life-giving death and resurrection. Without the Bible we cannot know Christ.

Tomorrow morning, we gather with the Risen Christ around first the font and then the altar. How could it be otherwise? For it is in these two great Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy

Communion that the risen Christ washes away our sins and unites us ever more deeply to himself in his glorious victory over sin and death. To him be all praise and honour. Amen.

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