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Easter Vigil

Holy Spirit College and Justus Lipsius College

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Lk 24:1-12

32 “ ‘But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found’” (Lk. 15:32 NRSV, cf. 15:24). This verse from the so-called parable of the Prodigal Son is the key to understanding the meaning of the Easter Vigil. The Easter vigil tradition originated at a time in the early Church when the majority of those who were baptized were adults. The precondition for an adult baptism was and is a “conversion”, a turning away from a sinful life and a returning to the merciful Father. The younger son in Luke’s parable is the paradigm of a conversion. “‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son’” (Lk. 15:21 NRSV). A process of deepening the conversion preceded baptism which as a rule happened during the Easter Vigil, because Baptism sacramentally seals the conversion which is a dying with Christ and a rising with him, movingly expressed in the three times submersion and re-emersion from the baptismal waters. The apostle Paul puts it similarly in Romans 6, the text we just heard before the gospel: “Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4 NRSV). The focus of the Easter Vigil is therefore on those to be fully sacramentally initiated into faith in Christ as members of the community of the Church. This night, around the globe, thousands of catechumens will be baptized, confirmed and will participate in the Eucharist for the first time; and strictly speaking, there is no reason, no justification to celebrate the Easter Vigil, if there are no adults to be baptized. That may sound a bit too provocative, and please do not get me wrong: I am not intending to suggest that we stop this celebration here and now. But the provocative idea is intended to make a point. If there are no adults to be baptised, all our attention needs to be on the renewal of our baptismal vows. Even if we were baptised as infants, when we renew our baptismal vows, this needs to be a sealing of a conversion, because there are different types of conversion. There are of course the big conversions like those of Saul/Paul, of Augustine, of Teresa of Avila or of Edith Stein, to name but a few. Even these were processes that were being prepared for a long time and that took time to be deepened and consolidated. There are also the ongoing and continuous little conversions. The sole purpose of Lent and its observances is to lead us to conversion. So, yes, there is a reason to celebrate the Easter Vigil even when no adult baptismal candidates are around, namely when enough “conversion” has happened to renew our baptismal promises.

I would like to suggest that everything up to this point in the Easter Vigil has been challenging us to renew our baptismal promises, to recommit ourselves to lives as Christians:

The Creation account invites us to examine ourselves whether we truly believe, even in the present world, that God created the world good, that the good is stronger than evil and that evil will not prevail. God is more powerful than Putin and his henchmen.

The second reading of the Aqedah, the binding of Isaac challenges us to ask ourselves whether we are committed not to sacrifice our children, even anyone else to any power that puts a godlike claim on us. We are to discern very carefully which voice is from God and which one is not, and to commit ourselves to live for others instead of being “profiteers”, people who live off the back of others. Is it justified for the rest of the world to expect our brothers and sisters in Ukraine to be sacrificed to the monster of Moscow hoping that this will save us from attack?

The reading of the Exodus account invites to examine our conscience whether, when faced with the Pharaohs and oppressors of this world, we are willing to take sides for the oppressed, whether like Moses we are committed to withstand evil forces and evil people. God is at the side of the Israelites and at the side of the Ukrainians who the victims of unjust and barbaric attacks. In the face of such crimes there is no neutral ground, anyone who does not support the unlawfully attacked has already sided with the oppressor (including the pope).

The fourth reading from Isaiah 54 challenges us to examine our conscience whether we believe in God’s steadfast love and act accordingly, something much more challenging than we might think. Those who manage to believe in God’s steadfast love we call saints.

The fifth reading from Isaiah 55 invites us as followers of Christ to believe in God’s universal love which calls into question any tribalism, nationalism and nativism. God’s gifts are for everyone, not just for us and our world.

The reading from Baruch is a challenge not to forsake the fountain of wisdom and to walk in the way of God.

And finally the reading from the prophet Ezekiel confronts us with the question whether we really believe that conversion is truly possible, whether we are able and willing to accept the new heart and the new spirit that God offers us.

The Easter fire and the Easter candle put before us the question whether we are open to be inflamed by new hope, to live our lives between the Alpha and the Omega, in the perspective of God’s Reign, whether we accept to be light of the world as Jesus has told us.

Our gospel reading from Luke raises the crucial question whether we are prepared to believe the resurrection witnesses and whether are willing to become resurrection witnesses ourselves in a world which considers that message *lêros*, translated in our gospel as “nonsense”, we could also say humbug, Quatsch, in the best case “showy, but useless” (LSJ). Are we open to receive the good news of Christ’s new life, over and over again, from those the people around us, including organised religion, consider least likely? Not from the leaders, but from those who prepare the spices and ointments, those who care for the outcast, those whom our churches and societies crucify. (cf. Lk 23:54-56, the immediately preceding verses of our Gospel passage this night: 54 “It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning. 55 The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. 56 Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments. On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment”).

In a moment we shall pray the litany of the saints, yet another invitation to prepare for our renewal of baptismal promises. Are we willing to be part of a communion of people who went before us and who will come after us, a communio sanctorum of people from whom we can learn what it means to be a disciple of Jesus?

The church gives us 50 days to practice and exercise that new life. Let us take the challenges seriously and support each other. We see before our own eyes how many of the leaders of Christian traditions miserably fail when faced with the challenges of our times. And that is nothing new. Today as always the credibility of the message of the resurrection depends on people like Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, people like me and you.

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