

Easter Vigil Sermon St Andrew's Northwold 2010.

Christ has died, Christ is Risen, Christ will come again

The familiar words of the Memorial Acclamation resonate on this Easter Eve as we celebrate this first Eucharist of Easter in this ancient church. Tonight, through the rich symbol and words of the Vigil liturgy, we breathe new life into the age old story of God's faithfulness and love for His creation which culminates in the death and resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ.

*The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.*

Last night and tonight the Memorial Acclamation also resonates because we've revived part of an ancient liturgy and given it a contemporary twist. The old Easter Sepulchre here at St Andrew's dates from around the reign of Richard II in the late 1300's ...that is if the uniforms of the little stone soldiers standing guard are a correct visual guide. It was carved as an integral part of late medieval Easter ritual and after standing abandoned for around 500 years, functions once more as an integral part of the unfolding drama of Holy Week in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

We're very lucky to have such a well preserved sepulchre. Of course it's a bit weathered now but it seems largely to have escaped the worst attentions of the iconoclasts of Henry VIII's reign and Cromwell's New Model iconoclasts a century later.

Reform may be necessary as a corrective but it often attracts extremists intent on throwing the baby out with the bath water. One of the problems with some 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> reformers was that they decided that anything symbolic was idolatrous - even when the symbol pointed towards the deep truths of the Christian faith. Of course there *were* aberrations - both theological and liturgical - in late medieval piety which needed reform, but the newly literate

urban merchant classes which comprised the majority of those hungry for change forgot that words alone never tell the whole story.

Think about Jesus and about how he used the material, the tangibles of life – bread, wine, water as signs pointing to the deepest truths about his identity and mission. He illustrated his parables and engaged with people using those aspects of life which were familiar to people on the land – seeds, wells, shepherds and many more. He didn't give them sacred texts to read but he enacted the sacred before their eyes in his healings and signs. He was and is the Word made flesh – God with Us. The Doctrine of the Incarnation is central to our faith as Christians.

The liturgists of long ago – from the Church Fathers through medieval times – understood the use of symbol to highlight essential truths about our Christian faith. Holy Week ceremonies were rich in enacting the solemnity of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday then transformed into the joy of Easter and, with Easter dawn, the rising to new life of the newly baptised with Christ. The new fire and Paschal candle – the light shining in the darkness – the light of Christ which conquers death – these were and *remain* powerful symbols visualising the truth of the resurrection. The use of incense which symbolises prayer rising to God and deep reverence for God who is holy and immortal, underpins the truth, the reality that Jesus the Christ *is* our God – he is both human *and* divine. In recent years, liturgical revision across many Christian denominations has recovered the power of symbol to point towards divine truths. Symbol used correctly is *not* idolatry but a window into the sacred...like the wonderful icons of the Orthodox tradition.

In the past, Easter Sepulchres featured prominently on Good Friday when following the veneration of the Cross, the Cross, sometimes accompanied by the reserved Sacrament was wrapped in linen cloths and 'entombed' at the north side of the altar. These ceremonies inspired devotion and reverence – not I must stress mindless devotion to an idolatrous piece of wood, but

grateful acknowledgement that Jesus – Emmanuel – God with us - **did die** on the Cross for us and through his sacrifice we have life. In lifting high the cross, they proclaimed what we proclaim – the love of Christ made visible. This is what the use of symbol is about – a pointing towards the deep truths of our faith – keeping our faith alive before our eyes as it were. Enacting the story brings it to life. The ‘burial of the Cross’ enacts the Passion Story. Christ was buried in the tomb. He really did die.

Then, silently, with no witnesses, the unthinkable happened...the central mystery of our faith happened...Jesus Christ rose from the dead. In his power the stone was rolled away, with only the linen cloths remaining to show that he had been shrouded in death.

In the old Sarum rite of the late Middle Ages, the Gospel we’ve just heard – the arrival of the women as those first witnesses to the empty tomb was dramatised during the service...again using the Easter Sepulchre as the focal point – this time of the empty tomb, of the proclamation of the Resurrection. The altar linen remained in the Sepulchre, as it did tonight, as a visible representation of the Gospel story... of the miracle of resurrection.

Finally the linens were removed from the sepulchre and placed on the altar, ready to greet Christ in His sacramental presence, as He is made present on the altar. This again is not empty ritual, nor superstition, but a profound Gospel truth...Jesus said:

*I am the Bread of Life...very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life and I will raise them up on the last day....*

Shocking words – then and now. And yes, Jesus meant them. In the consecration of bread and wine He is with us to the end of the age ...‘He is here, we ask not how’ as we shall sing in our Offertory hymn a little later.

Through the power of His death and resurrection He gifts us with life...eternal life now as we share this Paschal Meal with Him, with all the company of heaven and with each other tonight.

So an ancient rite is revived. But it is no empty ritual. Rather here we have rich symbol as we enact the central truths of our faith. In the drama of the liturgy we place ourselves in the moment, inside the Passion and Resurrection narratives as participants. We feel the pain, betrayal, numbness, shock of those who lovingly placed Jesus' lifeless body in the tomb. When we stand by the empty tomb to hear the Gospel proclaimed, we share the shock and awe of women confronted with a missing body and daring to hope, to believe in the angels' message that Jesus lives. And finally as we enact Jesus' actions on the night before He died, in awe and praise and thanksgiving. Like Cleopas and his friend at Emmaus we recognise Jesus in the breaking of the bread. He is with us in bread and wine until the end of the age...until He comes in glory. That is the 'mysterium fidei' – the mystery of our faith. That is our Christian hope, the deep, deep truth of our Easter faith, enacted in this liturgy on this most solemn and joyous Easter Eve.

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May the deep peace, hope and joy of Our Risen Lord be with all of you this Easter. Alleluia – He is risen indeed. Amen.