

EASTER VIGIL

Westminster Cathedral

This is a night of great promise and of great light.

It is full of promise for the one who embodied our death, who took on the burden of our sins, has been raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In a small measure, we know the weight of sin. It lies heavy in our hearts at times.

In a similar measure we know the darkness of death. We watch the work of death everyday, in the natural disasters of Japan, in the work of war in Afghanistan and Libya and so many other places. We watch death do its work in the disintegration of bodies and minds in the sicknesses which rob us of our loved ones and carry us to our end. In Jesus the ultimate effects of these deaths are overcome, for in him God fulfils his promise to bring all creation to a new fulfilment, a new and glorious life.

This is also a night of light. So often we walk in uncertainty, not knowing where to turn, often more than a little confused as to what exactly to do, the distinctions between right and wrong less than sharp, the route fracturing into many different byways and some dead ends.

Into this confusion comes this new and startling light. It is like a new cosmic blaze, a new dawn, shedding a powerful and warming light which we can describe only in terms of absolute love. Yes, it is the light of love that radiates from this tomb. It may not be the light of constant certainty or the light of instant wisdom. But it is the light of unquenchable love, a love which overcomes the separations, the disintegrations and the confusions with which we live, day by day.

Often the coming of Jesus into this world is spoken of as his leaving his Godhead to enter into our mortal world. His rising from the dead is seen as his return. And this is true. But sometimes, hidden in that thought, is the idea that Jesus took on our messy humanity only as a necessary condition for his mission in our world and on his return he leaves all that messiness behind. But this is not so. Jesus comes to our world as the act of God's love. He enters our flesh not as a burden to his Godhead but as an expression of the deepest nature of all that God has made, for God saw it and it was good. And in returning to his Father, Jesus does not strip away his humanity as if it were a source of impurity. No, he rises in and with his body. He carries it home. And with his risen body he carries home all of the created order, which has its being through him, the Eternal Word. Jesus, we are told, loves his own even to the end, even though his own would not accept him. But in his rising from the dead, in his own homecoming, each one of us also find our way home truly opened and clearly marked out.

We may often be tempted to think of our flesh, our humanity, as the part of us that we must get beyond, of which we must let go. But Jesus does not do that. Rather, he raises it up to new life.

Only in this light do we see our physical world correctly. Only in this light, the light of our eternal destiny, do we see our true glory, and the glory of our bodily selves. In God's eyes we never lose our dignity, not even when the human body is stripped and debased, as it is so often for reasons of violence and exploitation. Here, on this night, is a human body raised from the dead, raised from a broken and deformed state and entered into its true and eternal glory. And in that body we all share. For this is the body of our Lord, shared with us in every Eucharist, when he takes us into himself that he may, in due time, take us to our heavenly home.

So on this night of promise and light, let us be restored in our Christian confidence. No matter what other voices of gloom may say, it is this faith which brings such joy, such hope, such inspiration into our daily lives. Others may criticise and belittle the things of faith. They do so from a distance, with little understanding of the true reality of a relationship with the Lord. We know better because we live these truths of faith, we know and love our Lord and rejoice in his resurrection and new life.

And this faith is to be proclaimed, by our lives, by our prayer and occasionally by our words, too. Today, we recall with joy, the invitation of Pope Benedict, offered to us in this Cathedral, that we are to be witnesses to the beauty of holiness, witnesses to the splendour of truth and witnesses to the joy and freedom born of a living relationship with the Lord.

Today our hearts are full of joy as we greet our risen Lord and accept again his sparkling invitation to live in him, to pray in him, to rise again in him, in God's good time. Amen.

✠Vincent Nichols