

Easter Sunday 2011

Homily of the Most Rev. Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster
1030am Mass
Westminster Cathedral.

This morning we wish each other a very happy Easter, for this is a day of great promise and of great light.

It is full of promise because 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. We proclaim: Alleluia, He is Risen!

With his rising from the dead, we are now given the chance to rise from our sins. In his rising from the dead, we now see beyond the shroud of death.

We know the darkness of death. We watch the work of death everyday, in the natural disasters of Japan, in the ceaseless work of war in zones of conflict around the world. Indeed today we pray for peace: for the city of Misratah and for a ceasefire in Libya that new political structures may be put in place; for peace in Afghanistan, in Syria, across the Middle East, in Ivory Coast and in so many other places. We watch the work of death in the disintegration of bodies and minds through the sicknesses which rob us of our loved one and carry us to our end. In Jesus the ultimate effects of these are overcome, for in him God fulfils his promise to bring all creation to a new fulfilment, a new and glorious life.

But death casts a long shadow. So many good things of this life escape us sooner or later, coming to an untimely end. We know what gives us joy and satisfaction. But they do not last. Friendships die, and may even turn bitter; holidays come to an end and routine returns. Even the best of parties finish and sometimes all that is left is the hangover! So where does lasting joy abide? What is it that makes life truly worthwhile?

Into this scene 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 is the light of unquenchable love, an unfailing love which gradually overcomes the separations, the disintegrations and the little deaths 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 to the glory of God. And this is true. But sometimes, hidden in this thought, is the idea that Jesus took on our messy humanity as an unfortunate condition of his mission in our world and on his return he leaves all its 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 finds our way home 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 go beyond, which we must somehow reject. 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 morning, 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.

This gift of the light of faith gives us the true meaning of our lives today. This faith is prompted in our hearts not so much by a fear of death as by a quest for life. Without this faith so much is missing from life. For me, all that gives me lasting joy, all that really moves my soul and inspires hope and confidence within me, all that is marked by true beauty, is all rooted in the mystery of God, and in that mystery of God made visible in Christ. Without that faith, life would be shaped only by the meaning I can give it. Without such faith we can become afraid of living. Indeed, in pain and loneliness, or in even the prospect of pain and loneliness, life, for some, loses its purpose and killing oneself or a loved one becomes a beguiling temptation.

But life, in itself, is a gift not a possession: a gift of God not a self-made acquisition. In Christ's resurrection we glimpse the full splendour of that gift – body and spirit – in its true meaning for today and its true destiny for tomorrow.

This Easter Day is a great festival of human life, in Christ conquering corruption and death, in Christ coming to its glory.

So on this morning of promise and light, let us be restored in our Christian confidence. Those who belittle faith and ridicule the things we cherish 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