

Easter Vigil Homily 2020

These last weeks, we've been reminded of our vulnerability and we've been reminded that we are one human race, viruses do not respect borders, we are all in this struggle together. ***We are reminded of our common humanity.*** This is something we have forgotten but it was our original destiny to understand our oneness. As we heard in the first reading from Genesis, we were originally created to live in friendship with God. Adam is Hebrew word for humanity. So, the purpose of the whole human race is that we are created male and female in God's image because there is meant to be complete oneness among ourselves and also oneness with God.

We lost this sense and human history as we know has been a bitter struggle. The Easter Vigil readings show us how God gradually coaxed us through history to rediscover who God is and what our true destiny is. There are actually 7 readings but normally in a parish we only 3 of them. One of the readings though, is obligatory, the passage from Exodus. Through Moses the Israelites learnt that God cared for them and that God saved them. This was the most important teaching of their history and is celebrated even today at Passover. If we are to be restored into that oneness with God, it is crucial that we understand his yearning to care for us and save us.

Human beings being what we are, the Israelites, despite arriving in promised land, gradually forgot this basic truth. So, prophets constantly kept trying to insist on this, e.g. third reading we had tonight was from Isaiah 54 where Jerusalem is in ruins and the people are dejected and God promises its renewal and his everlasting love for his people.

Unhappy creature, storm-tossed, disconsolate, see, I will set your stones on carbuncles and your foundations on sapphires. I will make rubies your battlements, your gates crystal, and your entire wall precious stones.

Then God says: *But with everlasting love I have taken pity on you, says the Lord, your redeemer.* But its even more staggering: *Now your creator will be your husband, his name, the Lord of Hosts; your redeemer will be the Holy One of Israel, he is called the God of the whole earth.* God is desiring a relationship with the human race that is like the unity of a husband and wife. Such is the unity God wants with us.

This is why God goes to the lengths of the incarnation in Jesus Christ and in his suffering and death at the feast of Passover. In Jesus, his saving action is not to lead them to a safer country from slavery in Egypt but to lead us through death into the new life of the resurrection. Because once humanity receives the new life of the resurrection then we will be completely united with God.

I was reminded of this, listening to the second reading at the Office of Readings on Holy Saturday about the harrowing of Hell. This idea, going back to at least the second century, is that as Christ died and entered the world of the dead, the powers of hell trembled because they knew their powers were defeated. This scene is depicted in ancient mosaic and frescoes and icons of ancient churches across Europe both east and west. Sometimes even showing the devil in horror as Christ destroys death. Then there is the lovely moment as Jesus greets Adam and Eve and takes them by the hand to lead them out of the world of the dead. He doesn't restore them, however, to what they had in paradise, but instead takes them up to heaven. Astonishingly, the very cherubim that were placed on guard to stop them entering paradise, will now worship them in heaven.

Worship them? The staggering future of humanity is to be united with God so that the angels end up worshipping us! This call to oneness with God is right at the heart of this reading. As Jesus grasps Adam's hand to take him to heaven he says *"Rise, let us leave this place, for you are in me and I am in you; together we form only one person and we cannot be separated.* We are one person and cannot be separated. The when he enthrones Adam in heaven, remember Adam stands for all humanity, Jesus says *"I who am life itself am now one with you."* This is our extraordinary destiny!

We are not there yet of course but the Joy of Easter is the knowledge that because Jesus is Risen from the dead, we can see the future. In his resurrection the future has begun. In that knowledge, despite all our challenges, that resurrection life is already in us to give us joy and strength. My Mass intention this evening is for an old friend of mine, Aileen Jones who sadly passed away a couple of weeks ago. Over 30 years ago she had to have a heart transplant in 20s. She was very proud to be Scottish but her new heart was from Birmingham so, being a brummie myself, I used to pull her leg and say, you may be Scottish but you have a brummie heart! In these last 30 years, she has often been very ill, but she had an indomitable spirit. Her faith in the resurrection gave her the power to live her life to the full and she was a great musician and composer and everyone who knew her knows that as she arrives in heaven and joins the heavenly choirs, the volume will be doubled! This is our baptismal call. As we renew our baptism now, we are called to firmly believe in the resurrection and in that knowledge, despite our challenges we keep that joy and trust in our hearts so that we can share that hope to all the world.