

Easter Vigil (B)

(Genesis 1:1-2:2 / Genesis 22:1-18 / Exodus 14:15-15:1 / Isaiah 54:5-14 / Isaiah 55:1-11 /  
Baruch 3:9-15,32-4:4 / Ezekiel 36:16-28 / Romans 6:3-11 / Matthew 28:1-10)  
04.04.2015

In the course of this night of Solemn Vigil, having listened to the Old Testament at length, we then heard proclaimed in the New Testament lesson what Paul wrote to the Romans.

Reflecting on the implications of our baptism in Christ, the apostle called upon them (and through them, he calls upon us) to walk in *newness of life, no longer enslaved to sin*.

Truth be told, this message can daunt us.

Newness can frighten us.

We can feel threatened by what is new and therefore unknown.

There is a real temptation for us to take refuge in what is familiar to us, even if that be slavery.

Already the Hebrews reacted this way during their journey to the Promised Land of Freedom. From what we are told it is evident as they travelled along, they began to feel insecure. When the going got tough they began to regret the onions they had left behind in Egypt, even though they had eaten those onions as people enslaved.

The Israelites' crossing of the Red Sea and their entry into the Land of Promise was not without awakening fears within them.

At one point along the way they were so terrified they cried out that it would have been better to have died in Egypt than to have to face up to the challenges with which they were confronted in their new situation.

There are times when we reason a bit like the Hebrews.

For some mysterious reason we resist God's call to newness of life in freedom of heart.

The uncertainty of freedom presents us with a much greater challenge than the false security that goes with captivity.

Even practising Christians (dare I say especially practising Christians?) can distort things when it comes to living the gospel's key message which is *glad tidings of freedom* and the *gospel of salvation*.

We can distort the Christian message, by living it for ourselves and presenting it to others, as being more about adhering to a restrictive moralising code of conduct than walking in the liberty God wills to see His children enjoy.

Pope Francis is forever putting us on our guard against a *rules and regulations approach* to the Christian life.

He stresses the importance of living in *The Joy of the Gospel*.

The gospel way is proposed to those *who long for life and desire to see good days*; it is for *those who want to know happiness*.

St Benedict takes this up in the Prologue of his Rule for Monks.

The gospel way Benedict proposes in his Rule is precisely for people who long to be happy and free in their following of Christ.

If only the Church/the Churches presented the gospel as such!  
If only we ourselves understood and lived the gospel in this way!

We must dare to ask ourselves:  
Are we walking freely in newness of life?  
Or, are we living lives that are held bound, paralysed, as it were, by enslavement to sin?

Paul writes: *Count yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ!*

This means bringing Christ's experience into our lives and uniting our life experiences to His.

This implies more than what is sometimes called *the imitation of Christ*.

In a way, *the imitation of Christ* is just impossible for any of us. It is beyond us.

Considering ourselves *dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ* is about believing in, taking to heart, realising, making our own, those words of Jesus in which He insists that He lives within us.

To allow Christ to live in us is a better approach to life than to imagine that we can imitate Jesus by our good behaviour.

Not so long ago I met an old Franciscan priest who did me a world of good. He said many things to me in a short space of time and at the end he asked me as one would ask a child: *Do you know who said all that to you?* I knew the answer and had to say it simply, like a child: *I know it is Jesus who has said all that to me.* Yes, he retorted: *It is Jesus who is saying to you today: be free, walk in newness of life, remembering that the kingdom of God is within you.* He accentuated that last line.

This is the basic message we heard from St Paul tonight at the heart of this celebration: we are inhabited with God's own life.

Being a Franciscan, well-formed in the teaching of Duns Scotus, the old friar then reminded me of something a great Franciscan teacher of the 13th/14th centuries insists so much upon: the importance of free will. The old friar's parting words to me were: *God has gifted you with this terrible gift of free will. Use it to choose freedom.*

We all have been given the terrible gift of free will: to choose freedom!

If we want to know freedom we will know it.  
If we truly desire to be set free, we shall be set free.  
We will be strengthened to leave captivity, slavery, bondage behind us.

Understand me.

I am not talking here of human will-power, but of radical reliance upon the truth of God's word and the action of His spirit willing the good within us.

Jesus warned us: *The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. So pray!*

What Christ is saying to us there, reminding us of the importance of prayer, amounts to this: we

must rely on the Lord, and not on ourselves alone.

Our first reading from the Book of Genesis showed us the power of God's word.

*God spoke the word and all that is came into being.*

In Christ-Jesus God has spoken His word of life.

The *newness of life* to which we are called tonight is Jesus Christ Himself: Christ-Jesus living within us.

We are challenged tonight to live every action, thought, word, every feeling, emotion and passion of our lives *in Christ*.

*Christ in our hearts is the power which unifies and makes whole our total self, so that everything we have and are form but one personality: Jesus-Christ living and loving in us.*

As Paul wrote to the Colossians: *Having received Christ Jesus as Lord we continue to live in Him.*

When we come to see that *our real life is in Christ* we know great freedom of heart, an energy is released in us over and beyond anything we could ever have imagined.

We come to experience the truth of those words written by Paul to the Corinthians: *We are a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come.*

If only each one of us would dare to say for ourself what Paul could write to the Philippians: *Life to me is Christ.*

On this Easter night, Christ's rising from the tomb bids us to come out of all those dark places into which we so readily lock ourselves, closing out God's light and God's life from our lives.

In tonight's resurrection gospel we read how *the stone which stood at the entrance to the tomb was found to be rolled away.*

Christ was released!

Set free from that place where it was thought Jesus put to death was held captive in the tomb, He now lives and is forever active in the world all around us.

The angel's message given to those who came to the tomb was: *Go tell His disciples that He is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see Him, just as He told you.*

The Risen Christ is found in the ordinary, everyday circumstances of our lives: in our Galilees.

He wants to be set free in our lives tonight.

He longs to see us accept that that the stone which is placed at the entrance of our hearts can be rolled away.

When we consent to this, what we find is that Christ's life-giving energy is released within us and is left free to produce extraordinary things through us.

Yes, the Lord wants to rise up within us and reach out through us tonight to share His life with all those with whom we share our lives in today's world.

His desire is that the transforming power of His resurrection - which is nothing other than love - so

touch our hearts, and, be unleashed within us, that it may reach out through us to transform the world in which we live, bringing others to taste the new life, in freedom of heart, for which they also long.

Amen!