

Easter Vigil

One of the reasons why the liturgy and our sharing in it are so important is that they remind us just how central to our lives and to our faith the experience of gift is. When we gather for the Eucharist and for special liturgies like this one, we do so ultimately in response to an invitation from God and Christ mediated to us through the church.

Good Friday is inseparable from the Easter Vigil and Easter Sunday. The death of Jesus would not have the meaning for us that it does if he had not been raised by God to the fullness of life. Nor would his resurrection have much meaning apart from the life and death that preceded it and that are brought to fulfillment through it.

The Gospel, the good news at the heart of the teaching of Jesus and of the preaching of the church, proclaims that, out of compassion and mercy, God has reached out to us in his incarnate Word or Son, calling us to enter into a new and renewed relationship with him and with his daughters and sons everywhere.

This new relationship is defined above all by love. When asked what is the greatest of the commandments, Jesus answered, to love God with all our mind and heart and soul and strength and to love our neighbour as ourselves. Jesus

challenges us not only to love one another as he loved us but to love even those whom we have difficulty getting along with and perhaps even think of as our enemies. Such love is beyond our natural capacity. It is only possible to the extent that we have been transformed spiritually by the gift of the Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit of love. St Paul once declared that "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." It is the gift of the Spirit that enables us to love in the way that we are called to love.

The word "grace" which is so central in the letters of Paul and in the history of the church means something "freely given." Used in relation to Christ and to Christian life, it underlines the gift character of what is ours in Christ. It includes forgiveness and peace, hope and faith, courage and fidelity. Most of us first encountered such grace in baptism. The fact that we were infants at the time underlines that the new life that is ours in baptism is pure gift.

As far as we know, the Apostle Paul was the first person to connect baptism to the death and resurrection of Jesus. In the reading we heard a moment ago from his letter to the Romans, Paul interprets the going down into the water and the rising up out of it as a symbol of baptism. In it we go down into the tomb with Jesus in order to rise up with him to newness of life.

The new life that is ours in baptism is a sharing in the life of the risen Christ. It is meant to grow and develop and come increasingly over time to define who and what we are. It is a pure gift, a gift, however, which we are invited to embrace and nurture and bring to maturity.

To remind us of the gift and the challenge that are ours in baptism, the Easter liturgy invites us to renew the promises that we or someone else made in our name when we were baptized, especially the promise implicit in the other promises, the promise to live the kind of life to which through baptism we are called, a life that reflects the life and teaching of Jesus.

May our celebration this year of the triumph in Jesus of life over death lift our spirits and be for us a source of hope and courage as we continue to do what we can to confront and to overcome the ravages of the corona virus pandemic through which we are all living.