

## A REFLECTION IN THE OCTAVE OF EASTER

I prayed my way through a Good Friday liturgy and “performed” the Easter Vigil, both in my solitary sitting room. Yet, it was not as strange as I had anticipated. I have never been comfortable about “saying” Mass on my own, especially when the heart of the celebration is meant to be a dialogue: “The Lord with you” and “Lift up your hearts” and the lovely “May the peace of Christ be with you always”. However, I discovered that the Good Friday liturgy was quite uplifting. Maybe one of the reasons was that there was less dialogue involved. At 3.00pm I started off with the reading of the Passion according to John and when I reached the line, spoken by Pilate, “....take him yourself and crucify him...” I meditated on the Stations of the Cross. They were, in fact, very moving. I stopped at the twelfth Station (Jesus dies on the Cross) and read the prophecy of Isaiah, which starts with the words, “Without beauty, without majesty, we saw him, no looks to attract our eyes; a thing despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering....” After continuing the Stations I read the Hebrews reading about Jesus being our great High Priest, who intercedes for us, which poignantly led me into praying the solemn intercessions, for the Church, for other Faiths and for those with no Faith. There was a special prayer sent from the Bishops of England Wales, for the afflicted during a pandemic:

“Almighty ever living God, only support of our human weakness, look with compassion upon the sorrowful condition of all who suffer because of the coronavirus pandemic; relieve the pain of the sick, give strength to those who are for them, welcome into your peace those who have died and comfort all those who are bereaved. Throughout this time of tribulation, grant that we may all find comfort and strength in your merciful love. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

There was no solemn unveiling of the Cross, but I used my own little crucifix and even sang three times, “This is the wood of Cross on which hung the Saviour of the world.....Come let us worship”! I kissed the Cross and prayed silently for a while remembering all the parishioners of St Joseph’s, Blessed William Richardson and St Mary Magdalene’s and held everyone in pray, especially those suffering with the coronavirus, for those who have died, for the bereaved and for those who care for them. I ended my little, yet powerful service with a solemn blessing on all of us.

We of the Christian Faith are not alone in this cruel lockdown. At this time of year the Jewish Passover is celebrated and very shortly Ramadan begins. Like us, collective commemoration, reflection and celebration lie at the very core of these great religious festivals. We can only celebrate such feasts via Zoom, Skype and the WhatsApp technology and in our own rooms. I continued in my own room to celebrate the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday night. Though there was not the same drama and glorious symbolism usually associated with the Paschal Mysteries, I felt that the little celebration in my own room was any less significant than if it was celebrated in a magnificent cathedral. According to Google searches for the word “prayer” boomed across 75 countries, dwarfing anything previously seen in data going back to 2004. In Britain, online streaming of services from churches has generated virtual congregations far bigger than the numbers of those previously attending in person. A similar pattern is being observed in Jewish synagogues. It seems that isolation is a breeding place for people hungering spiritual food. That’s why it is so important that we continue to play our part in not just helping ourselves to make sense of our own faith, but also helping the country through this ordeal. We are, as Pope Francis keeps insisting, a mission Church. The sacrifice of Jesus, who is at the centre of our faith, reflects the sacrifice of so many people who are staying at

home, despite the glorious weather, and so making a difference to the lives of others. This is at the heart of the Paschal Mystery that we celebrate.

I started off the "Vigil" (a little earlier than usual) with the Old Testament readings: The story of creation from Genesis, followed by the story of the Israelites crossing of the Red Sea to the Promised Land, and most appropriately from the prophecies of Isaiah the call to be a faithful people, especially in times of darkness. I then read the Gospel up to the point when it is announced by an angel, ".....he is not here, he has risen...." Then I took my lighted "Paschal" candle and proclaimed the Exultet rather than having it beautifully sung as in past years. After that I blessed a bowl of water and then I renewed my baptismal promises. It was at this point that I realised that all the parishes were with me - St Joseph's, St Mary Magdalene's and Blessed William Richardson. The feeling of solidarity was quite tangible, and there was a real sense of oneness which filled my heart with love and a peace that this world cannot give. As I blessed myself with the holy water I prayed:

"God, our Father, we ask that all who are affected by this coronavirus be held in your loving care. In this time of uncertainty, help us to know what is ours to do. We know that you did not cause this suffering but that you are with us in it and through it. Help us to recognise your presence in acts of kindness, in moments of silence, and in the beauty of the created world. Grant peace and protection to all of humanity for their wellbeing and for the benefit of the earth. Amen."

I was so "wrapped up" in the Mass I celebrated at this (low key) "Easter Vigil" that I celebrated Mass once more on Easter Sunday morning, and even renewed my baptismal promises again. I have kept the small amount of holy water that I blessed and once we are all back to meeting as a parish congregation, I will use that water to bless us all as a welcome back to the baptismal waters and have our hearts and our faith renewed and refreshed. The holy water is a reminder to us that we all share in the one Faith, one Body, one Church and that we are truly one with each other with one Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Even though we are an Easter People and our song is Alleluia, the truth is that we are still forced to carry out our Lenten penance. Normally after 40 days of Lent, with fasting and carrying out acts of penance, we stop all that when we reach Easter Sunday. But this year is different – we have a Lenten fast to continue and a Cross to carry that we did not chose – the isolation and the social distancing continue. But celebrating the Risen Lord gives us the power and strength to march forward with hope in our hearts with a renewed sense of direction and purpose – we will win through. We remember the great Easter hymn, "Thine be the glory, risen conquering Son, endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won."

May the peace of the Risen Christ live in your hearts and keep you safe.  
Love, Andy

An old communist joke from the other side of the Iron Curtain

A comrade has saved his money to buy a car. He goes to the dealership to place his order. "Your car will arrive in seven years," says the salesman. "Will that be in the morning or afternoon?" asks the comrade. "What difference does it make?" says the salesman. "I have to know," says the comrade. "I've got the plumber coming in the afternoon."