

Easter Vigil Homily – Plymouth Cathedral – 2020

I have often said in these days, we are all either infected or affected. That seems even more true each day. This morning, I heard of the death of my cousin from this terrible virus. His name is Michael. I ask your prayers for him and especially for his wife Pam and their family, whose hearts are obviously broken at this time. The two priests here in the sanctuary with me have heard of the death of friends, also because of this virus. And you all know of course, that my mother is at present struggling – battling - with the virus. I thank you all, for your words of comfort and most especially for your prayer. I ask you, please, to continue that.

It's so difficult for loved ones to be far away, from those they love at this time. It is difficult for us not to be able to visit elderly and vulnerable relatives and friends. It's the most natural thing we want to do. It's almost like we are all entombed, at this time. Locked-down in our houses and homes. I know that the priests feel almost entombed in their churches, as tonight they celebrate the Easter Vigil on their own.

Earlier today, someone said that this virus is almost like a dark force. We know not from where it comes, or where it is going. How important it is, how vital it is, for us today, to mark this night, when we recall this greatest truth of our Faith. That death, darkness, does not have the final word. Jesus who was entombed - we recall on this night - in the early hours, broke from that tomb. Because He has risen, because He is risen, He sheds light on all of our pain and suffering, on the darkness, on the difficulties that we experience.

There is the very beautiful scene in tonight's Gospel, of one of Jesus' closest friends Mary Magdalen and the other Mary coming to the tomb. This 'other Mary', tradition tells us was *Mary Cleopas*, the wife of Cleopas, who was probably a brother of St Joseph. So, so Joseph's sister-in-law, sometimes described in other places in the Gospels as Mary's sister, these come together to the place of Jesus' burial. Mary Magdalen, a friend, and this Mary who was effectively Jesus' Aunty, come to the

tomb, as loved ones always do when someone has died. You go back to the place of burial. The rituals performed upon a faithful Jew who has died did not happen for Jesus, as he was buried so quickly, as the sabbath approached. They don't think about the details, that the stone would be rolled across the entrance to the tomb. They come with hearts full of suffering and full of grief, to anoint their friend, their nephew, out of love.

And something extraordinary happens. They are witnesses to it. It's not just something that happens to them. In this passage of the Gospel it says that there is an earthquake. It is a cosmic event. It is like the event of Creation, where God, brings things to be out of chaos and nothing. He brings life and the pinnacle of that, is the creation of the human being, male and female, in his own image and likeness. This event of the Resurrection is the new creation. It touches every single force in creation, even this chaotic virus, this darkness. We do not believe that God created this virus. We don't know why he permits it in His creation. But we do know that He is Lord of everything. Because Jesus came from out of the tomb, His resurrection touches the whole cosmos. He brings light out of darkness.

This is beautifully seen in the Paschal Candle, which began tonight's ceremony. The light of the risen Christ overcomes the darkness of the world, including the darkness of this virus. The Angel comes as the messenger of the resurrection. It is interesting that the two Mary's don't, at first see Jesus. They hear the message that He is Risen from out of the tomb, from the Angel, a heavenly messenger. Then this Angel shows them the empty tomb, and this experience transforms them. In the passage it says they run from the tomb "full of joy". It's only after they have heard of the announcement of the Risen Lord, that they actually encounter Him personally. So tonight, let us think about who the messengers are, the Angels from heaven, who speak to us the words of life and show to us, goodness in the face of evil, life in the face of death.

Of course, we think of the many parents, family members, and health care professionals, who in the face of this darkness, are showing

something of the love of the Risen Lord. Each of us needs to hear the message that the Lord is Risen, allow ourselves to be touched by this light, by the light of His glory. And the invitation is for us be like these two Mary's, who go to His followers and themselves become messengers of the Resurrection.

And how do we do this in lockdown? We do it firstly by our prayer. In our prayer we are aware that the Risen Jesus does not abandon us. If we feel as though we are entombed, He has overcome all the tombs in our lives. In prayer He shows us His Risen Face. We must pray for the sick, for the dying, for all those who have died recently. We must pray for all those who are seeking to be witnesses of the risen life of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, even in lockdown, we can be messengers of Good News. Maybe by phoning someone, or by using modern media, over these next 24-48 hour's, phone somebody, or contact them on modern media, if you have not spoken to them in some time. Even those of us who are elderly or vulnerable can do this. We can be a messenger of Joy in the face of the darkness of these times.

And finally, we must prepare to be His messengers, when this time of lockdown comes to an end, as we know, in God's providence and goodness, it will. Because of this day, we proclaim, "Jesus is Risen". He comes to each of us, as He came to those first two Mary's. His words to us are "Do not be afraid.....even in this experience.....do not be afraid,..... I am with you always".

Jesus Christ is risen, Alleluia, Alleluia. He is risen indeed, Alleluia, Alleluia!

+Mark O'Toole
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