

Sermon Easter Vigil Year B 2018

I'm sure it a truth that you know in your own life that the things that are most important to us are never said in just one way. One word, one expression, one action won't say all there is that needs to be said for the loves, passions and interests that shape our lives. This is also the essence of symbols. A symbol must speak at numerous levels. A symbol really only works *as* a symbol if the truth it seeks to communicate is communicated in many ways.

And symbols of course can change their meaning. The cross once inspired horror and repulsion, the symbol of Roman occupation, of their reign of terror, of their subjugation of local peoples and practices. But in the light of the resurrection it becomes the symbol of hope and faith. It becomes the symbol of an entire religion, of God's saving act in Christ.

While ISIS has reclaimed crucifixion to their bloody and godless ends, the cross remains for many a symbol of heroic virtue, of steadfastness in faith to those once more martyred upon this instrument of torture and shame. It is curious how even in our secular age, when people come to erect those makeshift, impromptu shrines on road sides at the site of fatal car accidents almost always they take the shape of the cross. The cross, then, clearly remains a *powerful* symbol, speaking something to the bereaved of hope, of honouring the dead, of eternal memory.

But in the life of the church, even the most basic of elements can be used symbolically. A church confident in its doctrine of Creation and of the Incarnation does not shy away for taking the things of the earth, investing them with symbolic power, and allowing them to speak to us of the things of God. And so, in our celebration tonight we take some of the most basic elements of earth to help us speak of and communicate what is ultimately beyond word: we take fire, bread, wine, and water and have them speak to us of eternal, ultimate, life-saving Truths.

In all the readings placed before us tonight it is the sign and symbol of *water* that is the common element. Perhaps the most *basic* of elements it becomes the *heart* of what we celebrate tonight. And of course, this just confirms a consistent pattern in our faith: of God taking the ordinary to make himself known. We see it in the Eternal Word who leaves the glory heaven to take on human flesh. We see it in Christ himself who as a lasting memorial makes himself present to us in the lowly form of bread. And so, water, then - the source of all human life, and the most basic, essential of all things - becomes the source of Christian life. The mystery of the resurrection is so deep and profound, so wondrous and important it is perhaps best communicated by something so simple and so basic as water.

In times past the vigil we celebrate tonight took all night, Christians gathered to read and pray and sing until the dawn. As the church became more settled it became more selective in its readings, so that what was read more intentionally reflected what was being celebrated. We hear 4 readings tonight from the Old Testament. Early lists outline 14 readings, so you have got away with it easy!! And through all of them flows a stream of water....

We see it Genesis with *the spirit hovering over the waters*. In Exodus with Israel - pursued by the blood-lusting Egyptians - led through the waters to safety and freedom. In Isaiah we hear the invitation to all who are thirsty *to come to the water*. In Ezekiel, looking to the depravity, idolatry and unfaithfulness of Israel, we then hear how God shall *pour clean water over and you will be cleansed, I shall cleanse you of all your defilement and idols, I shall give you a new heart, and put a new spirit in you*. In all these it is quite intentional that we read baptismal overtones. The early Christians looked to the Jewish scriptures and saw their resurrection and baptismal faith written all over it. So, from the spirit hovering over the waters from Genesis we understand baptismal life as the domain of the Spirit. The crossing of the Red Sea is seen as the freedom from the slavery to sin and death baptism brings. We are brought through the waters and liberated from all that keeps us bound to our old selves.

Isaiah's invitation to drink is a reminder that the water of life is given freely and abundantly and that true life, nourishment and refreshment only comes from the well of salvation. And Ezekiel's promise of cleansing water is a sign of hope that the depraved self, the fallen self, the sinful self, the diminished self can give way to a new heart, a new spirit as we allow God to cleanse and wash us.

From the beginning, the Church has understood baptism to be a sharing in Christ's death and resurrection. This is all made explicit when Paul in the Epistle reading reminds us *'Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.'* 'Newness' is both the promise and the reality of Christian baptism. It is *newness* which is both the promise and reality of Christ's own resurrection. It is why baptism and the celebration of Christ's resurrection are so inseparably entwined. It is why we hear the readings set before us tonight. And why in a few moments we move to the font, bless the waters and recommit ourselves to our baptismal life.

The first reading from Genesis outlines God's *original* work of Creation. The Gospel announces to us God's *new* creation in raising Christ from the darkness of death. Baptism brings us to that new creation. The early church saw the resurrection as God's first act in the new creation and so called the day of resurrection *the eighth day*. And this is why, as we gather around the font, we recall how baptism has us share in Christ's new life.

This most holy of nights, we celebrate Christ's victorious triumph over death. We come to him and allow him to cleanse us and wash us. We pray that we may be intent on being faithful to our baptismal life. We pray that every day may be for us an act of God's new creation. Amen.