

HOMILY: EASTER VIGIL 2019

I am sure there cannot be many of us who can honestly say that we have unfailingly, every year, got through the Easter Vigil and First Mass of Easter entirely dry-eyed. Fortunately, a substantial part of the liturgy is done in the half-light; so it is not too difficult to furtively brush aside the ‘unmanly tear’.

Why does this Easter Vigil and First Mass of Easter touch us like this? Is it simply because in it we find, apparently, sadness and happiness set together in a particularly poignant way? The five grains of incense – meaning Christ’s five wounds – and the Light that means the Resurrection Dawn? Or, in the Gloria, jubilant praise of Life set alongside the memory of the ‘Lamb slain’?

No, that is not really it. In fact, it is way off the mark, because to see this liturgy in terms of ‘tears of sorrow’ mingled with ‘tears of happy relief’ means we are not at all on the right wavelength.

The fact of the matter is that ‘tears of sorrow’ and ‘tears of happy relief’ are shed by those who view Death in the world’s terms. Death, understood in the world’s terms, makes us weep in what is really a self-regarding way – because it shows us our human limits; and deprives us of what we would like to have for ever – as if we were God.... And then, if by chance there is some remission – as worldly people we shed tears again: tears of happy relief – but the tears are really just as self-regarding.

Rather, let us ask that tears may come to our eyes in this liturgy tonight because we are glimpsing here a Mystery which is infinitely greater than ourselves – the mystery of God’s Forgiveness and God’s Freedom. Because, in the figure of Jesus Crucified and Risen, God, in one single moment, forgives us and offers us his freedom. He takes us out of ourselves. He forgives our selfish concerns, and especially our selfish view of death – and in the ‘Lamb Slain...reigning immortal’, he shows us who truly is God – and sets us free.

For in this liturgy, God tells us that death is not tragic; but, rather, that if we will accept his forgiveness, we will find death is simply for us, as it was for Jesus, ‘the Return to the Father’ – the gateway to freedom.

It is all infinitely more than we can cope with, so long as our life here on earth lasts. But, in the end, we are promised the Father will wipe away all tears from our eyes. It is not until we are on the far side of the grave that the promise will be fulfilled for us. But then, as the Spirit has free course in us, we shall rejoice in perfect freedom – freedom from death and freedom for God – as sons and daughters of the Resurrection.