

Fire and Light – the chasm between theory and practice at the Easter Vigil

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Nowhere in the entire liturgy is the chasm between theory and practice so gaping as at the Easter Vigil. Anyone reading books about the Easter Vigil meets nothing but superlatives: this is the centre of the whole year, mother of vigils, the greatest moment of joy, night truly blessed, and on and on. The same writers then quote beautiful early sources: a homily from Sardis, another from Ambrose, and some nuggets from Origen – for ancient Christian footnotes it cannot be beaten! On the ground it is very different. After sixty years of a public nighttime vigil (the Easter Vigil was reformed before the reforms of Vatican II), it has in many places become just another Saturday evening Mass with 'bits' added. In most communities it has failed to capture the imagination of the majority, and seems just an elaborate sets of jobs to be 'got through because it is Easter.' Quite apart from the fact that 'an Easter break' is now a fixed part of the holiday plans of many people, it is often a time of relatively empty pews. If we think of attendance is a measure of significance, then the Vigil is a thorough failure: at no other time is felt worth so out of kilter with that formal 'authorized' explanation.

There is a further irony. Recent decades have seen a massive level of experimentation in liturgy to find the dramatic, that which arrests the senses, and that which engages people's bodies and feelings as well as their minds. I have seen this desire to engage the senses used to justify every form of ritual from dance-based liturgy to a revival of the pre-1970 High Mass. Yet, the Vigil is one of the few moments in the formal liturgy that is full of drama – a great bonfire is mandated, the strange activity of passing 'light from light,' a eerie candle-lit procession into a darkened building, and the events linked to a baptism (either actual or virtual) – and the drama is built into the very rubrics! Yet, this drama is very often skipped, frequently minimized, and almost never properly exploited.

Faced with 'the problem of the Vigil' I have watched over a period of three decades a tacit down-grading of this liturgy so that now it is often a matter of just an hour's duration, that which can be dropped is dropped, and the notion of 'a vigil' *per se* avoided: it is Easter Sunday Mass anticipated in the same way that every other Sunday's gathering is held on Saturday evening. But is this a case of selling people short and are we, charged with being leaders of communities in their worship of God in Christ Jesus, failing in that task?

Identity and Hope

It seems self-evident that we gather at the vigil 'to celebrate the resurrection' and 'to remember the first Easter' – and we such words most introductions to the Vigil begin. But this up-beat message does not take account of the bitter reality that is a small part of every life and, sadly, a major part of many lives. To tell someone who has just been told that their pension has lost 10% of its value (I write as the Carillion debacle unfolds), that their child has learning difficulties, their mother's much needed hip replacement has been postponed, and who has just heard of a famine in one country and of whales being killed by floating

plastic, that all is joy and rejoicing because 'Christ has conquered' seems like some silly mix of dreaming, delusion, a con: 'don't worry: it'll be all right in heaven.' Somehow, having to huddle around a bonfire, having to remind ourselves that there is another way, and feeling faith as trying to see by the glimmer of a candle in the darkness, seem far closer to our experience. We actually live much of our lives in a darkened state, and faith is a straining after the light as we journey on in darkness. Paul caught this when he said 'for now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then' - looking forward - 'we will see face to face.' Newman put it in more intellectual terms: we move out of shadows and images into the truth. This is not some 'dark night of the soul' as written about by mystics, it is a normal part of life that faces the facts of tragedy, evil, and mess. We are in the darkness but looking forward to the dawn, we are as convinced of that dawn - a better way in this life and a victory over death - as we are convinced of the dawn of the Sun tomorrow after its setting this evening.

We are not so much 'an Easter people' - there are moments for such rejoicing - as a people of hope. Every dawn after a dark night is a sacrament for us of the divine dawn we await in hope in the darkness of life. So the Vigil is not so much 'rejoicing in the resurrection' as *celebrating our identity as people who in darkness hope for, look forward to the dawn.*

This raises two practical questions:

1. Are we giving our sisters and brothers an opportunity to experience this sense of being together in the darkness - openly declaring its reality - and being a group who draws strength from being a group who wait for the dawn? Put another way, do we ever provide a moment in the liturgical year when we let people use the basic human clock - the alternation of day, night, day - to be a metaphor for their pilgrimage of faith. And we should remember that this basic clock is the metaphor in almost every other area of life!
2. Thinking of the vigil as expressing our cosmic situation as Christians - we are in a dark world but believe the darkness is not final: there will be a dawn - how do we let people experience this as their identity? Put another way, if *we believe there will be a dawn*, how can I express that in a way that is not only my affirmation, but our affirmation (because faith is always what *we believe* before it is my appropriation of that hope)?

Darkness

Take a piece a paper and jot down the symbols used in the Easter Vigil. The list will be a long one: fire, candles, paschal candle, water, oil (at a baptism), vestments, bread, wine the list goes on. But have you listed *darkness*? Yet it is darkness that is the unique element in this liturgy. We gather in darkness, we wait in darkness, we perform many parts of it in darkness. The darkness is a declaration of reality: this is where we are at now - and it is a symbol of so much of our lives, and our sense of our lives, and it is the experience of so many humans. Our world can be a dark place - and we Christians start there and we face that fact!

But do we? The simple answer is no. We short change people by refusing to take darkness seriously in liturgy, but people in 'real life' have no such choice. Why do I say we don't take it seriously? A spot check a couple of years ago [when Easter fell late] of 20 parishes in a single diocese [I picked the first 20 who had put the times of the Vigil on their websites] showed me that 18 held the vigil while there was still daylight, one was in real darkness, and one was on the cusp of darkness. But we must embrace the reality of darkness not as morbid depressives, but as people who face human reality but live in hope of the dawn. We owe it to our sisters and brothers to give them the opportunity affirm this part of their existence in the presence of God and his people.

But even when we do gather after darkness has fallen, we seemed so embarrassed we race through it to get inside with all the lights on - this may reflect our deep desire for light but is also represents a flight from reality and denies that Christians have to persevere in hope. We have to live and work in the darkness. If the darkness last just a couple of moments - and sometimes there is the ever 'helpful' sacristan with a torch, intended for use when changing a tyre, acting as a spotlight on the president 'so that father can see the book - and seen as just an introduction, then we have not taken the symbol seriously.

The darkness has to be prolonged. The best way to do this is to celebrate using just the fire's light until the Paschal Candle has been lighted, and then have the whole of the liturgy of readings by candlelight. Indeed, the most effective use of darkness was where the candles alone provided light until the Liturgy of the Eucharist began (which is not supposed to begin until dawn!). Not only was this a real statement of how we strive to see, with just glimmers of light, the glory of God in the midst of a darkened world, but it stopped the silliness of extinguishing candles one minute to have them relit a few minutes later for the renewal of baptismal commitment.

If a Vigil is to speak to us, and our life situation, it has to take darkness seriously - and in the midst of that darkness we have to affirm our identity.

Readings and identity

There is one matter on which there is widespread agreement about the vigil: 'the readings are too long,' 'they don't make sense,' or 'that Old Testament stuff is awful.' When I ask ordinary people about this vigil these opinions are openly expressed, when I ask clergy the answers are more coy but amount to the same thing - the proof is that in many (most?) places they are reduced to the legal minimum, and it is virtually unknown for the whole set of reading to be done in an 'ordinary parish.' Let us now worry about the reasons given to justify this, let us simply note the fact: this set of readings is 'like salt that has lost its flavour and can now only be thrown out to be trodden underfoot'!

But there is another problem. While almost everywhere the list of readings is curtailed, most still think that they are OK so long as they 'keep the rubrics.' This means that the third reading (Ex 14:15 - 15:6; 17-18) because it is obligatory is still read. This, with the Canticle of Moses which follows it, is the type of the

Passover and the antetype of the Paschal Mystery – and hence is considered so special. Alas, almost no reading causes so much confusion. We as listeners – as distinct from religious trained in the methods of *lectio divina* – do not think in terms of types, antitypes, and antetypes. This means that when we hear of God slaughtering the Egyptian soldiers (who were just doing their duty) and even their horses we are repulsed. Surely there is enough perversion in the world which rejoices in warfare, mayhem, and waste. Surely there are enough warrior-images of God and enough people who want to use religion as a cover for violence that we can do without this? Every year, with the same regularity as the arrival of Easter Eggs in the shops, I am asked why are we reading about God killing men and horses – and then being asked to rejoice in this? One can try to explain that there is an ancient-near-eastern genre of praise poetry that is based on the image of ‘the warrior saviour,’ and this was transferred to the Lord, and then understood by analogy ... using this hermeneutic ... within that cultural content ... and that it is read symbolically and not literally (one can keep going). The simple fact is that this is a reading which, even if it worked in an earlier age or when the only people who understood it were a small group of literate, theologically trained clergy, is now counter-productive. In our world *we must not present God as a warrior*. We must not leave open the possibility that God is formally presented by the Church as a Being who deliberately brings violence into the world and rejoices in it.

So what should we do? The central theme of this sequence of readings – and the sequence is the most ancient continuous element in the Vigil – is that they express our identity as those who hope in the Christ. We are a people who look forward to deliverance now and in the future, because of the event of the Paschal Mystery. So the question we have to ask is not ‘what readings should we read?’ but how would we express who we believe we are as the people of hope? This is not an easy question to be answered in a moment with a few jotted notes: this asks us to examine ourselves, reflect, pray, and talk with one another. In this way, selecting the readings that we will use at the Vigil – and remember that *de facto* we do not use the one’s formally provided – needs to be the outcome of the discussions and reflections of Lent. This week, next week, with that group, with another group, in this situation and in that, we need to discuss: we are we as the baptized?

Preparation – celebration

Lent is when we prepare for Easter, for the baptism of new sisters and brothers, and recall who we are as the baptized people; the Vigil then celebrates this. In any community there will be a variety of answers to this question of identity, and, indeed, no two Christians will be identical: the Spirit speaks to each of us in our individuality. But we come together to share these insights and to learn from one another. Perhaps some will find a part of that identity in a passage from the Torah or the prophets, others may fasten on a passage from the Psalms or the wisdom literature. Others still will fasten on a Christian text or even feel the need to compose a new answer to express their identity in the Word made flesh. These fruits of preparation – the results of Lent – then form the spine of a time of waiting in darkness, with only the glimmer of candles all drawing their light from

just one candle, for the dawn.

The Vigil offers us a dramatic context both to affirm our identity and acknowledge where we are: we live an often-dark universe, but stand together in hope because of the Christ. Celebrating this is not easy, and it demands much more than taking the ritual as 'a given' and 'following the rubrics.' But acknowledging the extra work, we owe it to those we serve to facilitate them to celebrate it well.