

EASTER VIGIL 2020

Many years ago I went with a group of students from Blackfriars school in Adelaide on a trip to Japan. We attended the Easter vigil in the Hiroshima Cathedral. We had been, earlier that Holy Saturday, to visit the museum in Peace Park which records the terrible events of 6th August, 1945, when the atomic bomb exploded over the city.

Among the terrible pictures and accounts of that time, I was struck by one image: a picture of a tram running through the devastated heart of the city. A commentary explained that, on the third day after the bomb fell, the tram service was restored as a matter of pride, resilience, and determination: determination to restore life to Hiroshima. You might say that symbolically on the third day Hiroshima came back to life.

This picture showed me a wonderful example of the human spirit. It taught me that we humans desire life and that we can respond to attacks on life – whether from bombs or from viruses – with remarkable resilience. It is an example of “resurrection” which comes to mind naturally to us on a night such as this, but it is in the end an example of *natural* resilience. Tonight we celebrate something even more wonderful: something *supernatural*.

We are right, of course, to approach this great mystery by way of analogy with familiar things. Our Lord himself did the same, when, for example, he said that, “unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain.” The grain appears to die, and is buried in the earth, but the warmth of the sun and the moisture in the soil allow it to germinate, to burst forth with new life.

Such analogies are possible because we are made by God in his own image and likeness. When God acts on and through us by grace, he is not acting *against* our nature but rather lifting us *beyond* our nature, in the direction, as it were, in which our nature is already pointing, towards the destiny, indeed, that God has planned for us.

So we have a natural affinity, a natural love, for life. We have a desire for immortality. But we cannot, of our own nature, achieve what we long for. Saint Augustine summed it up well in his famous passage in the *Confessions*, “We were made for you, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

The joy which echoes through the church tonight is the joy which comes from our faith that Christ is risen, and that his resurrection is ours also. The longings of the human heart are not in vain.

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Thus the great Christian saints were great both in life and in death. They knew, by the light of faith, that death is not an end, but the beginning, not a defeat but a victory.

Now I have heard politicians say of the current crisis such things as “Together we can beat this virus” and “We are going to have a great victory.” Well, that probably is true of humanity as a whole, but no-one can guarantee that it is true of you or me personally. Around the world, one hundred thousand people have died from the virus already. None of us can be sure of escaping it.

But the victory of Christ over death is of a different kind. Jesus was not victorious by escaping the Cross but by enduring it. His resurrection has changed the meaning of death. No virus can rob us of that victory. Only sin could do that – sin which is emptiness, selfishness, vindictiveness, pride. But Christ has conquered sin, and offers us freedom if only we will open our hearts to it.

That is why tonight we renew our baptismal promises, rejecting sin and professing faith. This is why the *Exsultet* speaks of “the power of this holy night, when Christians everywhere washed clean of sin and freed from all defilement are restored to grace and grow together in holiness.”

The power of this night lifts up our gaze from the difficulties of this world, and reminds us of our destiny, of God’s purpose for us, which is nothing less than everlasting happiness, eternal life with him.

– *Martin Wallace, O.P.*
St Dominic’s Priory, East Camberwell
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in a time of epidemic