

The Easter Candle

It has always been a sadness to me that so few people take the opportunity to join in the Easter Vigil, with the lighting of the Easter candle. Perhaps this year, since this liturgy is denied to all of us, might be a good moment for all to think about the wealth of meaning it contains:-

It begins in the darkness – the darkness of the disciples when their Lord had been placed in the tomb; the darkness of a world without Christ; darkness in the lives of those who do not know the Lord Jesus. The community gathers around a bonfire prepared outside, and the prayer said as it is lit makes clear its significance:

Eternal God, who made this most holy night to shine with the brightness of your one true light: set us aflame with the fire of your love, and bring us to the radiance of your heavenly glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**



The Easter Candle is then brought forward. It has been prepared with the Cross, the Greek letters Alpha (A) and Omega (Z) and the year date. The priest traces over these as he reminds us of their significance:

Christ yesterday and today,	(The down stroke of the Cross)
the beginning and the end,	(The side stroke of the Cross)
Alpha and Omega,	("The beginning and end of all things")
all time belongs to him,	(The first 2: All our time is his,)
and all ages;	(The first 0: now and all eternity)
to him be glory and power,	(The second 2: We glorify him the almighty,)
through every age and for ever.	(The final 0: Now and for ever)

All Amen.

Next he puts five incense grains in the candles one at each point of the Cross, and one in the middle. They represent the wounds of our Lord, in his hands and feet, and where the spear was thrust into his side; a reminder of the cost of our salvation.

He says: By his holy and glorious wounds may Christ our Lord guard and keep us. *All Amen.*

Here is a reminder that when we meet him in heaven, our Lord will still bear the scars that our salvation cost him – but in the glorious light of his forgiveness, the words of one of our hymns will find its full meaning: *Those wounds, yet visible above, in beauty glorified.*

Then the candle is lit, with the words:

May the light of Christ, rising in glory, banish all darkness from our hearts and minds.

We cannot really claim the title of 'Christian' if we overlook the pain and wickedness of Good Friday (in which we have a share), but neither can we claim that glorious title without allowing the light of the resurrection to 'banish all darkness from our hearts and minds'.

Now the priest leads the community into church, stopping just inside the door and twice more on his way to the chancel step for the versicle and response:

The light of Christ. *All Thanks be to God.*

All are carrying candles: some will take a light from the Easter Candle, and light the candles of those around them. Here is another metaphor for the Christian life: those who have received the light of Christ share it with those around them.

The candle is next placed on its stand, and the priest sings the **Exsultet**. This is a very ancient hymn of praise, calling heaven and earth to join in praising God for the glory of the resurrection. Though we shall have to be alone on Holy Saturday, my suggestion is that during the evening we light a candle, and recite the Exsultet quite slowly, giving ourselves time to take in the meaning of each paragraph.

Here it is, on the following 2 pages:

Rejoice, heavenly powers! Sing, choirs of angels!
O Universe, dance around God's throne!
Jesus Christ, our King, is risen!
Sound the victorious trumpet of salvation!
Rejoice, O earth, in glory, revealing the splendour of your creation,
radiant in the brightness of your triumphant King!
Christ has conquered! Now his life and glory fill you!
Darkness vanishes for ever!
Rejoice, O Mother Church! Exult in glory!
The risen Saviour, our Lord of life, shines upon you!
Let all God's people sing and shout for joy.

It is right and good that with hearts and minds and voices
we should praise you, Father almighty, the unseen God,
through your only Son, Jesus Christ our Lord,
who has saved us by his death,
paid the price of Adam's sin,
and reconciled us once again to you.

For this is the Passover feast,
when Christ, the true Lamb of God, is slain
whose blood consecrates the homes of all the faithful.

This is the night when you first saved our ancestors,
freeing Israel from her slavery
and leading her safely through the sea.

This is the night when Jesus Christ vanquished hell,
broke the chains of death
and rose triumphant from the grave.

This is the night when all who believe in him are freed from sin,
restored to grace and holiness,
and share the victory of Christ.

This is the night that gave us back what we had lost;
beyond our deepest dreams
you made even our sin a happy fault.

Most blessed of all nights!
Evil and hatred are put to flight and sin is washed away,
lost innocence regained, and mourning turned to joy.

Night truly blessed, when hatred is cast out,
peace and justice find a home, and heaven is joined to earth
and all creation reconciled to you.

Therefore, heavenly Father, in this our Easter joy
accept our sacrifice of praise, your Church's solemn offering.
Grant that this Easter Candle may make our darkness light.
For Christ the morning star has risen in glory;
Christ is risen from the dead and his flame of love still burns within us!
Christ sheds his peaceful light on all the world!
Christ lives and reigns for ever and ever!

It is right and good that with hearts and minds and voices
we should praise you, Father almighty, the unseen God,
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Amen.

There is more to the Easter Vigil service: the ministry of the Word and of the Sacrament. We shall probably read the scripture tomorrow, and perhaps with the help of televised worship make a spiritual communion. But I believe meditating on the Service of Light will give us a special 'window' onto the resurrection.