

Homily for The Mass of the Easter Vigil 2010

"This is the night". These words recur again and again throughout the Exultet, the paschal proclamation with which the deacon or priest begins our celebration in the Church. Everything that God has done for his people in the course of thousands of years is swept up into his definitive, greatest act, the raising of Jesus from the dead. Above all, it is a night of change and transformation. As we began our celebration, the Church was in darkness; then it was lit with the flame of a single candle, the brightness of which surprises us, just as two thousand years ago the light spreading from a tomb whose stone had been rolled back began to enlighten the world. Then the light was spread from candle to candle, and the more it spreads the more quickly it is passed on, until the whole Church is filled with light. Standing in the pulpit I look out and see a galaxy of little lights, each one lighting up the face behind it. The light of the risen Christ certainly shows us the way, but it is also reflected in our faces. This is powerfully symbolic; the risen Christ is a light to guide us, but as we follow his light our faces glow and we become lights ourselves, lights in a world of darkness, lights in a world of confusion, lights in a world of chaos. This is the night when darkness becomes light.

This change from darkness to light is certainly not the only change that we celebrate tonight. There is also a change from silence to song. Holy Saturday is a day of silence. There is no liturgy today until after dark, no music. With Christ's death on Good Friday, our voices also died away. It has been a day of emptiness, but now we have burst into song again. It is no coincidence that the first word to be sung, as we find our voices once more, was the word which has brought us all together: 'Christ' 'Christ our light', to which the relieved congregation replies 'Thanks be to God'. All is well once more, we have found our voices once again because we have found our Lord again.

Darkness becomes light, silence becomes song; but this is only the beginning of our night of transformation. In our first Old Testament reading we heard about God's creation of the world. Nothingness becomes substance, emptiness is filled. The story has begun, and as time ticks by and night gives way to day, then night, then day, little by little the great night, this night, draws closer. More than that, the second Old Testament Reading proceeds to set before us a further transformation: the people of Israel have been slaves in Egypt, but now they become free. What greater change could there be than this, what greater transformation than from a person in bondage to a free man. Slowly, steadily, the significance of this night of change and transformation builds up. The prophet Isaiah tells of the change from thirst and hunger to fulness and satisfaction, Ezekiel talks about God's will to change what is dirty into cleanness, to exchange a heart of stone for a heart of flesh. The great crescendo in this symphony of change comes when we sing together a word we buried six weeks ago. At last we have our alleluia back! This word which is the deep expression of Christian hope and praise has been lost to us since Shrove Tuesday, and now it has returned. It has come back to us just in time to announce the greatest change of all. In the midnight silence, unseen and unheard, comes the greatest change of all: a dead body becomes a living man. All these other changes and transformations have been leading up to this moment. It is this which has brought us all here tonight. We can imagine no greater change, no deeper transformation than this. At the heart of our Catholic faith there lies this simple truth: any change is possible, through God's power. We are invited to subscribe to this change, to become a part of it. All over the world tonight

people of every age and background, are joining a constant procession of people who have chosen to join the Church. For them this is a great moment of change. Of course, they were never outside God's love because when it comes to that everyone is an insider, but now they have crossed the Red Sea and become a part of the visible family of God. I remember so well the day I made that journey, and my prayer for those to be received today is that they will find something like the joy and the peace and the hope and the love I have found within The Church.

You might remember the story in Ezekiel of the valley of bones, and the question God puts to the prophet just before he breathes life into the bones: 'can these dry bones live?' (Ezekiel 37.3) As we look at our lives, at our tiredness, and our foolishness, at our lack of love, our petty anxieties and our useless tantrums, we can all see that there are parts of our lives that are pretty dry, pretty lifeless. Can these dry bones live? God can turn a dead body into a living man, so surely I can hope for some new life in me through the power of Christ's resurrection? This is the great night of transformation, after all. In a few moments we will bless Easter water, and it will be sprinkled over all of us. As that is happening, keep in mind that vision of the dry bones; keep in mind the vision of the people of Israel, led to safety through the water; keep in mind Isaiah's vision of cooling soothing water, free for all, and Ezekiel's vision of stony hearts turned to hearts of flesh. The great message of Easter is, change is possible. That is why, in the midst of difficult times, we can be optimistic about the future of The Church. We have heard so much criticism, but the truth is that the Church is always changing, always being renewed. The issues being raised now in other parts of the world were addressed in this country years ago; things have changed. Ironically, much of the positive change in The Church has been driven by the Holy Father, and no doubt that will continue. Easter proclaims, loud and clear, that the power of God can change us. A few years on, The Church will have changed; hopefully, the lives of some of those who have been hurt will have changed for the better, too. Then we will have the right to ask those who have used these days as an opportunity to vent their own prejudices against Catholicism, or those journalists who have resolutely ignored the truth, or those people who have tried to turn the Pope into a scapegoat, a sacrificial victim to be destroyed as a diversion from their own divided hearts: how about you, have you changed? There is always hope, change and renewal are always possible because don't forget at the heart of tonight's celebration there is a dead body that has become a living man.