

EASTER VIGIL

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Saint Peter's Basilica

Holy Saturday, 7 April 2007

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

From ancient times the liturgy of Easter day has begun with the words: Resurrexi et adhuc tecum sum – I arose, and am still with you; you have set your hand upon me. The liturgy sees these as the first words spoken by the Son to the Father after his resurrection, after his return from the night of death into the world of the living. The hand of the Father upheld him even on that night, and thus he could rise again.

These words are taken from Psalm 138, where originally they had a different meaning. That Psalm is a song of wonder at God's omnipotence and omnipresence, a hymn of trust in the God who never allows us to fall from his hands. And his hands are good hands. The Psalmist imagines himself journeying to the farthest reaches of the cosmos – and what happens to him? “If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, ‘Let only darkness cover me’..., even the darkness is not dark to you...; for darkness is as light with you” (Ps 138[139]:8-12).

On Easter day the Church tells us that Jesus Christ made that journey to the ends of the universe for our sake. In the Letter to the Ephesians we read that he descended to the depths of the earth, and that the one who descended is also the one who has risen far above the heavens, that he might fill all things (cf. 4:9ff.). The vision of the Psalm thus became reality. In the impenetrable gloom of death Christ came like light – the night became as bright as day and the darkness became as light. And so the Church can rightly consider these words of thanksgiving and trust as words spoken by the Risen Lord to his Father: “Yes, I have journeyed to the uttermost depths of the earth, to the abyss of death, and brought them light; now I have risen and I am upheld for ever by your hands.” But these words of the Risen Christ to the Father have also become words which the Lord speaks to us: “I arose and now I am still with you,” he says to each of us. My hand upholds you. Wherever you may fall, you will always fall into my hands. I am present even at the door of death. Where no one can accompany you further, and where you can bring nothing, even there I am waiting for you, and for you I will change darkness into light.

These words of the Psalm, read as a dialogue between the Risen Christ and

ourselves, also explain what takes place at Baptism. Baptism is more than a bath, a purification. It is more than becoming part of a community. It is a new birth. A new beginning in life. The passage of the Letter to the Romans which we have just read says, in words filled with mystery, that in Baptism we have been “grafted” onto Christ by likeness to his death. In Baptism we give ourselves over to Christ – he takes us unto himself, so that we no longer live for ourselves, but through him, with him and in him; so that we live with him and thus for others. In Baptism we surrender ourselves, we place our lives in his hands, and so we can say with Saint Paul, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” If we offer ourselves in this way, if we accept, as it were, the death of our very selves, this means that the frontier between death and life is no longer absolute. On either side of death we are with Christ and so, from that moment forward, death is no longer a real boundary. Paul tells us this very clearly in his Letter to the Philippians: “For me to live is Christ. To be with him (by dying) is gain. Yet if I remain in this life, I can still labour fruitfully. And so I am hard pressed between these two things. To depart – by being executed – and to be with Christ; that is far better. But to remain in this life is more necessary on your account” (cf. 1:21ff.). On both sides of the frontier of death, Paul is with Christ – there is no longer a real difference. Yes, it is true: “Behind and before you besiege me, your hand ever laid upon me” (Ps 138 [139]: 5). To the Romans Paul wrote: “No one ... lives to himself and no one dies to himself... Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (Rom 14:7ff.).

Dear candidates for Baptism, this is what is new about Baptism: our life now belongs to Christ, and no longer to ourselves. As a result we are never alone, even in death, but are always with the One who lives for ever. In Baptism, in the company of Christ, we have already made that cosmic journey to the very abyss of death. At his side and, indeed, drawn up in his love, we are freed from fear. He enfolds us and carries us wherever we may go – he who is Life itself.

Let us return once more to the night of Holy Saturday. In the Creed we say about Christ’s journey that he “descended into hell.” What happened then? Since we have no knowledge of the world of death, we can only imagine his triumph over death with the help of images which remain very inadequate. Yet, inadequate as they are, they can help us to understand something of the mystery. The liturgy applies to Jesus’ descent into the night of death the words of Psalm 23[24]: “Lift up your heads, O gates; be lifted up, O ancient doors!” The gates of death are closed, no one can return from there. There is no key for those iron doors. But Christ has the key. His Cross opens wide the gates of death, the stern doors. They are barred no longer. His Cross, his radical love, is the key that opens them. The love of the One who, though God, became man in order to die – this love has the power to open those doors. This love is stronger than death. The Easter icons of the Oriental Church show how Christ enters the world of the dead. He is clothed with light, for God is light. “The night is bright as the day, the darkness is as light” (cf. Ps 138[139]12). Entering the world of the dead, Jesus bears the

stigmata, the signs of his passion: his wounds, his suffering, have become power: they are love that conquers death. He meets Adam and all the men and women waiting in the night of death. As we look at them, we can hear an echo of the prayer of Jonah: “Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice” (Jn 2:2). In the incarnation, the Son of God became one with human beings – with Adam. But only at this moment, when he accomplishes the supreme act of love by descending into the night of death, does he bring the journey of the incarnation to its completion. By his death he now clasps the hand of Adam, of every man and woman who awaits him, and brings them to the light.

But we may ask: what is the meaning of all this imagery? What was truly new in what happened on account of Christ? The human soul was created immortal – what exactly did Christ bring that was new? The soul is indeed immortal, because man in a unique way remains in God’s memory and love, even after his fall. But his own powers are insufficient to lift him up to God. We lack the wings needed to carry us to those heights. And yet, nothing else can satisfy man eternally, except being with God. An eternity without this union with God would be a punishment. Man cannot attain those heights on his own, yet he yearns for them. “Out of the depths I cry to you...” Only the Risen Christ can bring us to complete union with God, to the place where our own powers are unable to bring us. Truly Christ puts the lost sheep upon his shoulders and carries it home. Clinging to his Body we have life, and in communion with his Body we reach the very heart of God. Only thus is death conquered, we are set free and our life is hope.

This is the joy of the Easter Vigil: we are free. In the resurrection of Jesus, love has been shown to be stronger than death, stronger than evil. Love made Christ descend, and love is also the power by which he ascends. The power by which he brings us with him. In union with his love, borne aloft on the wings of love, as persons of love, let us descend with him into the world’s darkness, knowing that in this way we will also rise up with him. On this night, then, let us pray: Lord, show us that love is stronger than hatred, that love is stronger than death. Descend into the darkness and the abyss of our modern age, and take by the hand those who await you. Bring them to the light! In my own dark nights, be with me to bring me forth! Help me, help all of us, to descend with you into the darkness of all those people who are still waiting for you, who out of the depths cry unto you! Help us to bring them your light! Help us to say the “yes” of love, the love that makes us descend with you and, in so doing, also to rise with you. Amen!

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