

MARTIN JAKUBAS

## Vigil of fire and water

The climactic Easter service addresses the senses of sight, sound, smell and touch; there is darkness and light, silence and music. Boldness and careful preparation are essential

In ancient times the peoples of northern Europe at the beginning of spring would gather on a hilltop and there would light enormous bonfires to alert their god, Woden, that winter was over and it was time for him to usher in the spring. Around the fire they pleaded for the return of life. We Christians similarly gather in the light of spring's first full moon to strike the year's new light and to raise a bonfire as a sign of the life that God brings. Our God, in the dying and rising of his son, Jesus, has conquered all darkness, sin and death. In the light taken from that fire we proclaim the great story of our salvation. In song we remember that happy fault, that necessary sin of Adam, which brought for us so great a Redeemer.

This dramatic, rather messy opening to the final event in the liturgy of these three days, which we call the Triduum, is one of the high points of this greatest of all feasts. We arrive in darkness and gather round the fire, like servants with our lamps trimmed and ready, awaiting our master's return so that when he comes he will find us wide awake and will sit us down at his table. The logs on the fire spit, and the servers giggle as the sparks come their way and the celebrant does his best not to catch his finest chasuble alight. The Paschal Candle is lit and we move to the darkened building where we light our lights from the one light and sing that Christ is our Light.

The candle is inscribed with the marks of Christ's Passion and his lordship over all time. As we follow it into the church building it is reminiscent of the Israelites who followed the pillar of fire by night in their escape from slavery in Egypt.

The Easter Proclamation, which is sung in the light of the candles alone, is the solemn announcement of why we gather this night. There is no way this text can be simply read – it demands song. If the deacon or priest is unable to sing it, any member of the faithful with the necessary skill should sing it.

Our gathering this night in vigil is a time of watching and waiting, and we have missed the point if we are in a hurry to get away. This is a night of looking, listening, touching, tasting and feeling and even smelling. Each of the symbolic activities of this night needs to be bold if it is to be ef-

fective. The fire needs to be big enough so that people can feel its heat and see its brightness.

The Church provides nine readings and psalms that speak of the wonderful things God has done for us. They start with creation and then trace the major events in the history of salvation. We look at these events through the lens of the Easter Proclamation and in the shadowy Easter Light kindled at the fire.

Over the years I have experimented with all sorts of different shapes for this vigil, starting with these readings, and then moving to the fire. But I have come to see the wisdom of holy Mother Church. This great story needs to be told in the Easter light to be understood properly. Similarly, to curtail the telling of this story is to try to short-cut our salvation. We shouldn't be tempted only to have the fewest number of readings and psalms. Silence and song are vital to the worthy and effective celebration of this waiting time.

The readers need to be carefully prepared. This is not simply a matter of technical skills but of understanding what they are going to proclaim. They need to walk with care to the ambo [lectionary stand] aware of the enormity of the task. At the end of the reading, in order to give people time to reflect on what they have heard, readers can stand in silence at the ambo for some time before the cantor launches into the psalm.

Having listened to the story of salvation unfold over aeons in the First Testament, we turn to the New. In St Paul's Letter to the Romans we are alerted that, just as Jesus died and rose for us, so we are called to die and rise with him.

We enter this great mystery through the waters of baptism, which is at the heart of this night. We miss out if we do not have adults or children of catechetical age to baptise. If we cannot manage this perhaps we should seek to baptise at least one baby. It really is only in the light of witnessing others pro-

fessing their faith publicly that the renewal of our own baptismal promises makes sense. In the sprinkling with this newly blessed baptismal water we should expect to get wet. Water blessed not only with words, but blessed through the dying and rising of these new Christians. A more effective way to sprinkle the water is to use one's hand rather than a brush or twig. The hand needs to be cupped and then one can scoop the water up and throw it into the air. Thus it can rain down upon people.

The newly baptised, including children of catechetical age, should be confirmed before coming to the table for Communion for the first time. We should not delay the Confirmation of the children because our particular diocese does not confirm until 14 or 16. The discussion about the right age for Confirmation for those baptised as infants will probably rumble on for many years, but for these newly baptised youngsters of cate-

chetical age the process is clear. They are confirmed here on the occasion of their baptism, anointed with the newly blessed sweet-smelling oil of holy Chrism, and thus ready to take their place at the table for Communion this night. Thus they complete their initiation with their first taste of the eternal banquet of the Lamb.

This is a night of words, sounds, music, sights, smells and touch. This is a night of darkness and light, silence and song. This is a night that demands careful preparation so that all can enter fully into the mystery of the dying and rising of Christ, fully conscious and actively engaged in what is happening. Be bold

with all of it. Die to sin and rise to new life.

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### TO DO

**Take** time to keep vigil. We need not to be in a hurry

**Keep** all of the symbolic activities of this night bold to ensure their effectiveness

**Ensure** the Easter Proclamation is sung rather than read

**Rehearse** the readers with great care so that they understand what they are about to proclaim

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■ **Fr Martin Jakubas is parish priest of St Paul's, Haywards Heath, West Sussex, and chairman and priest adviser of the Liturgy Commission of the Diocese of Arundel and Brighton. He is also a member of the Liturgical Formation Committee of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.**