

I have to admit that the Easter Vigil is one of my favourite services of the year - with all the dramatic actions of light and dark, of silence and music – it highlights the wonder and mystery of our faith. It is a service of hope and promise. From the story of creation, to the covenants which God has made – to the yearning of God have humanity accept love – to the wonder of the resurrection reuniting humanity and God for evermore. This morning – more than any other – is a time to hope and celebration.

A tradition of this service of Vigil is that we hear the sermon given by John Chrysostom, who was the Archbishop of Constantinople, he is remembered as one of the early church leaders, having been born in Antioch in 349. He wrote one of the greatest Easter Sermons of all times in around 400AD – encouraging us to live out our Easter faith in joy, in feasting and with passion. And is worth remembering its words...

Are there any who are devout lovers of God?
Let them enjoy this beautiful bright festival!
Are there any who are grateful servants?
Let them rejoice and enter into the joy of their Lord!
Are there any weary with fasting?
Let them now receive their wages!

If any have toiled from the first hour,
let them receive their due reward;
If any have come after the third hour,
let them with gratitude join in the Feast!
And those that arrived after the sixth hour,
let them not doubt; for they too shall sustain no loss.
And if any delayed until the ninth hour,
let them not hesitate; but let them come too.
And the one who arrived only at the eleventh hour,
let them not be afraid by reason of delay.
For the Lord is gracious and receives the last even as the first.
God gives rest to those that comes at the eleventh hour,
as well as to those that toiled from the first.

To this one God gives,

and upon another God bestows.
God accepts the works as He greets the endeavour.

The deed God honours and the intention God commends.
Let us all enter into the joy of the Lord!

First and last alike receive your reward;
rich and poor, rejoice together!
Sober and slothful, celebrate the day!
You that have kept the fast,
and you that have not,
rejoice today for the Table is richly laden!

Feast royally on it, the calf is a fatted one.
Let no one go away hungry.
Partake, all, of the cup of faith.
Enjoy all the riches of God goodness!

Let no one grieve at their poverty,
for the universal kingdom has been revealed.

Let no one mourn that they have fallen again and again;
for forgiveness has risen from the grave.

Let no one fear death, for the Death of our Saviour has set us free.
God has destroyed it by enduring it.
God destroyed Hell when He descended into it.

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Isaiah foretold this when he said,
"You, O Hell, have been troubled by encountering Him below."
Hell was in an uproar because it was done away with.
It was in an uproar because it is mocked.
It was in an uproar, for it is destroyed.
It is in an uproar, for it is annihilated.
It is in an uproar, for it is now made captive.

Hell took a body, and discovered God.

It took earth, and encountered Heaven.
It took what it saw,
and was overcome by what it did not see.

O death, where is your sting?
O Hell, where is your victory?

Christ is Risen, and you, o death, are annihilated!
Christ is Risen, and the evil ones are cast down!
Christ is Risen, and the angels rejoice!
Christ is Risen, and life is liberated!

Christ is Risen,
and the tomb is emptied of its dead;
for Christ having risen from the dead,
is become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

To God be Glory and Power forever and ever. Amen!

The Easter sermon of John Chrysostom (circa 400 AD) (with inclusive terms)

It is a powerful bit of poetry- and it invites us to ask - what do we do with all we see and hear and feel as we enter into this Easter Celebration?

How do we respond to the glory of God which is presented to us in the wonder of this miracle - how do we respond to the news?

The vision of the resurrection in Matthew’s Gospel is amazing - it captures the wonder and mystery of the event - there is an earthquake - and the guards are so overwhelmed they faint!

But the angel tells the women not to be afraid - but rather to go and tell. In fact, twice in this very short passage they are told this same thing - don’t be afraid - go and tell!

The joy of all we experience today should encourage us not to be afraid, but rather to allow it to inspire us in the way we continue to live out our

easter experience in the days, months and years ahead. And even more to the courage to go and tell others what we have found.

My training priest used to say to me – Easter is brilliant – but it doesn’t mean anything if it doesn’t inform and shape the way we live as a community for the rest of the year – it is muddling through the journey ahead that is the true Easter gift.

*Are there any who are devout lovers of God?
Let them enjoy this beautiful bright festival!*

Our Easter celebrations remind us, as does John Chrysostom there is a new and living hope right in front of us. And whether this is our first Easter celebration or our 70th or more – the invitation is the same – let us not be afraid but rather let us rejoice just like the women on that first Easter morning – and may it give us the courage and strength to go and tell others of our experience. Amen.