

### Sermon Easter Vigil 2006

Exodus 14 vv 10-31 & 15 vv 20&21, Ezekiel 37 vv 1-14, Zephaniah 3 vv 14-20, Romans 6 vv 3-11, Mark 16 vv 1-8.

An important part of this service is the readings from the Old Testament. Jesus is the culmination of the story of God's people. Understanding the Old Testament is essential if we are to understand Jesus. We are part of the same people of God who were delivered from slavery in Egypt, who were exiles in Babylon, who returned and rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem and who heard the voice of Jesus and saw His miracles. By the Death and Resurrection of Jesus we have been redeemed from slavery to sin. God's life-giving Holy Spirit has delivered us from the power of death. God the Father has gathered His scattered children in the Body of His Son, the Holy Catholic Church.

Exodus: The people had been slaves. Many people in the world today are oppressed. Some are actual slaves. Many work very hard for low wages with little choice. God still loves the oppressed. If we love God, we pray for the oppressed and work for their liberation.

There are other forms of slavery too. A lot of people are rich. Most of us enjoy a level of prosperity beyond the wildest dreams of the poorest people in Africa today. Yet people are not content. They worry about their appearance, their health, their status, their career prospects. They are not free. Jesus says, *Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin*, the slave of sin. If we worship gold and silver, we become like gold and silver – lifeless, cold, insensitive, worthless. We need to be set free from sin. Only Jesus can redeem us from slavery to sin.

The people of Israel eventually let Moses lead them out of Egypt. They were free from Pharaoh, but then they became enslaved again, this time by fear. They thought that the world they had left behind would now catch them up and destroy them. As they journeyed through the desert to the Promised Land, they would often long for the flesh pots of Egypt, cauldrons of meat stewing on the home fires. In Egypt they were slaves, but they were secure. They had to learn to trust God to be with them in the desert. They had to trust God to deliver them from Pharaoh's chariots, to trust that each morning they would find the manna. Only the manna didn't come on the Sabbath, because you have to trust God enough to take time for recreation and worship.

Ezekiel: Hundreds of years later, the Israelites had lost their home in the holy land. They had rejected God. They had adopted the ways of the Egyptians – false gods, oppressing the poor, tyrannising over the weak. They were not fit to live in the holy land. The pagan King Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple of God and carried its leading citizens away to what they saw as an unclean land.

People's faith grows cold. A nation turns its back on God. People die spiritually and live a hollow life built on the sham that material things can ultimately satisfy. We are told that this generation is opting not to have children, in favour of a big mortgage, a flashy car and lots of lovely foreign holidays. Spiritually dead, we are like dry bones scattered on the field of defeat. But God does not give up on us. He sends the Holy Spirit, *the Lord, the Giver of*

*Life*, the Spirit Who is poured out with the Blood of Jesus as He dies on the Cross, the Spirit of the Risen Christ. These bones can live, if we repent and are baptised.

Zephaniah: The people were one, redeemed by the blood of the Passover lamb, baptised in the Red Sea, like Noah and his family, all in one boat. But, as people are alienated from God, so they are alienated from one another. We divide into classes and tribes, races and families, interest groups, factions, gangs. We see people like us and people not like us and the people not like us are the opposition, the enemy, to be feared and beaten before they beat us. Alienation from God results in alienation from one another – the fragmentation of the human race. Babel's arrogant challenge to God leaves humanity scattered. The stretched out arms of Jesus on the Cross embrace scattered humanity in one body, His Body, the Church, the company of all those who are baptised in His Name.

So Romans expresses our solidarity, solidarity with the people of God, solidarity with the people of Israel, solidarity with Jesus Who has taken all our sins and weaknesses into Himself and forgiven them. We are baptised into Him, in His Death and Resurrection. We are redeemed from slavery to sin. We have received His life-giving Spirit. We are united in His Body, the Church, united with God, united with one another. Walk worthy of your redemption.

So finally, Mark. This Easter morning's Gospel ends abruptly. The two Marys and Salome have seen that the tomb is empty. An angel has told them that Jesus has risen and he has told them what they have got to do. But we leave them, as Mark may well have left them, fleeing from the tomb, afraid at first to do anything.

Yet we know that, from that beginning, God would build His Church. So what about us? Redeemed by the Blood, filled with the Spirit, one with God and all God's people, we have a vision; we have a commission. What are we going to do as witnesses of the Resurrection of Jesus?