

# readings of Holy Week



**Remember how he told you, . . . that the Son of Man  
must be handed over to sinners and be crucified &  
on the third day rise again ( Luke 24 : 5 - 7 )**

## the Easter Vigil (a)

# VIGIL OF EASTER

## *look for Jesus among the living*<sup>1</sup>

### introduction

The Easter Vigil is the feast of fire, light and water – or, more exactly – the feast of the Risen Christ; energy; enlightenment and life for all.<sup>2</sup> We are incorporated into Christ through baptism, which has its most appropriate framework at the Easter Vigil. We gather in darkness, to prepare to celebrate the dawning of Easter; the celebration of fulfillment of the ancient promises of liberation from the powers of death, in GOD's triumph, in Jesus.

### first reading: Genesis 1 : 1 – 2 : 2<sup>3</sup>

[ Six Days of Creation and the Sabbath ]

*In the beginning GOD created the heavens and the earth.(1) The Earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.(2) And GOD said, "Let there be light;" and there was light.(3) And GOD saw that the light was good;(4) GOD called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.(5) And GOD said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters."(6) So GOD made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so.(7) God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.(8) And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so.(9) God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And GOD saw that it was good.(10) Then GOD said, "Let the Earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so.(11) The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And GOD saw that it was good.(12) And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.(13) And GOD said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be*

- 
- 1 Cover Image: Icon of the "Anastasis" or "Resurrection" – also referred to as the "Descent Into Hades." The victorious Christ, resplendent in gold garments, cross in hand, is depicted shattering the gates of the biblical realm of the dead (*sheol* in Hebrew; *hades* in Greek; often, though imprecisely, translated as "Hell") decisively and forcefully grabbing Adam and Eve – representative of humanity and the righteous awaiting deliverance (cf. *Hb.11:39-40*) – by the hand and pulling them out of this darkened realm restored to fellowship with GOD.
  - 2 The selection of readings for inclusion in the Easter Vigil needs to be fitted into the available time. For example, if 45 minutes is considered the length of time for the Liturgy of the Word section of the vigil, the choice needs to allow for a leisurely pace combining the chosen readings with silent periods, prayers and some hymns. Only a good balance of readings, silences, explanations and prayer, can achieve the hearing of the WORD of GOD with profit at any time. It is especially so on this the most important of all the vigils of the Church year.
  - 3 *Gn.1:1-2:2* is an introduction to the whole Pentateuch. It shows how God brought an orderly universe out of primordial chaos.

*for signs and for seasons and for days and years,(14) and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the Earth." And it was so.(15) GOD made the two great lights – the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night – and the stars.(16) GOD set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the Earth,(17) to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And GOD saw that it was good.(18) And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.(19) And GOD said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the Earth across the dome of the sky."(20) So GOD created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And GOD saw that it was good.(21) GOD blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the Earth."(22) And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.(23) And God said, "Let the Earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the Earth of every kind." And it was so.(24) GOD made the wild animals of the Earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.(25) Then GOD said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the Earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the Earth."(26) So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.(27) God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the Earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the Earth."(28) GOD said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the Earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.(29) And to every beast of the Earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the Earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so.(30) GOD saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.(31) Thus the heavens and the Earth were finished, and all their multitude.(2:1) And on the seventh day GOD finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done.(2)*

The text contrasts an Israelite future characterised by the Lord's blessing with the chaotic present, which is formless, empty and dark – the experience of exile in Babylon. The priestly editors account is an artistic statement designed to give a sense of serenity, order, and control, in the same way the story of GOD's creative

life-giving power brings shape to the original chaos. The LORD's grace transforms the old world of chaos and exile.<sup>4</sup>

The LORD GOD's new history will bring blessings and a secure place for all the insecure and adrift ones. The same power for blessing was announced to Noah's family, who trusted GOD amid the chaos (*Gn.9:1:7*). It was announced to Abraham (*Gn.16:2*), Jacob (*Gn.28:3-4 & 35:11*), to Joseph (*Gn.47:27 & 48:3-4*) and to the liberated ones in Egypt. In these passages, the writers assure that the Israelites can rely on GOD for their secure place in the world where the LORD GOD. Humankind presides over this world as God's agents. People are to subdue the Earth so that what it contains is, *'fruitful and multiplies'*. Its to be a non-exploitative way of acting. The world-making is done by the LORD through human activity.<sup>5</sup> But the LORD authorises it and is known to be present within it.

**response: Psalm 104 : 1 – 2, 5 – 6, 10, 12 – 14, 24, 35b**

[ God, Creator & Provider ]

*Bless the LORD, O my soul,  
O LORD my GOD, You are very great.  
You are clothed with honour and majesty,(1)  
wrapped in light as with a garment.(2) . . .  
You set the Earth on its foundations,  
so that it shall never be shaken.(5)  
You cover it with the deep as with a garment;  
the waters stood above the mountains.(6) . . .  
You make springs gush forth in the valleys;  
they flow between the hills(10) . . .  
By the streams the birds of the air  
have their habitation;  
they sing among the branches.(12)  
From Your lofty abode You water the mountains;  
the Earth is satisfied with the fruit of Your work.(13)  
You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,  
and plants for people to use.(14) . . .  
O LORD, how manifold are Your works!  
in wisdom You have made them all;  
the Earth is full of Your creatures.(24) . . .  
Bless the LORD, O my soul. Praise the LORD.(35b)*

The psalmist celebrates the goodness and awesomeness of the Lord's creation. Its a hymn of praise to GOD who easily and skillfully made rampaging

4 [v.2a] *'The deep'* - the primordial ocean according to the ancient Semitic theory of the creation of the universe. After the Lord's creative activity, part of this vast body forms the salt-water seas (*Gn.1:9-10*); part of it is the fresh water under the Earth (*Ps.33:7; Ezk.31:4*), which wells forth on the Earth as springs and fountains (*Gn.7:11; 8:2; Pr.3:20*). Part of it, *"the upper water"* (*Ps.148:4; Dn.3:60*) is held up by the dome of the sky (*Gn.1:6-7*), from which rain descends on the Earth (*Gn.7:11; 2 Kg.7:2, 19; Ps.104:13*).

5 [v.26] Humanity is here presented as the climax of God's creative activity; a human person resembles God primarily because of the dominion given by God over the rest of creation.

waters and primordial night into a world vibrant with life. The speaker describes GOD's splendor in the heavens (vv.1-4), how the chaotic waters were tamed to fertilize and feed the world (vv.5-18), and how primordial night was made into a gentle time of refreshment (vv.19-23).<sup>6</sup> The psalmist reacts to the beauty of creation with awe (vv.24-34). It is a statement about creation's order, symmetry and majesty reflecting that the LORD is known to be confident and at ease; delighting in the LORD's own handiwork. This awareness leads to spontaneous wonder, gratitude, and praise. The world is 'a well-parented' free gift. But the gifting comes with an expectation and a cost! Every generation learns what the first humans in the garden learned (*Gn.2-3*); that the nurturing holy ONE has not abdicated rule. In the reign of delight, the parental will must be honoured.

**second reading: Exodus 14 : 15 – 15 : 1**

[ the Israelites cross the Red Sea; their pursuers drown ]

*Then the LORD said to Moses, "Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward.(15) But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground.(16) Then I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and so I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army, his chariots, and his chariot drivers.(17) And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gained glory for Myself over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his chariot drivers."(18) The angel of GOD who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. (19) It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.(20) Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided.(21) The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.(22) The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers.(23) At the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic.(24) He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt."(25) Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers."(26) So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea.(27) The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained.(28) But the Israelites walked*

<sup>6</sup> The picture is like *Gn.1:1-2*; a dark and watery chaos is made dry and lighted so that creatures might live.

*on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.(29) Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.(30) Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses. (31) Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD; "I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."(15:1).*

The desperate minority community of slaves and midwives, for whom Moses is the spokesman, do not see how a newness can come, or how the evil can be overcome, or how they have a future out of the totalitarian present in Egypt under the Pharaoh. Moses addresses these fears, to the throne of GOD, who then declares that the religious claims of the Egyptian gods have been nullified. The faith of Moses and the Israelites, to break away from the religion of static triumphalism and the politics of oppression and exploitation, is vindicated in the new reality that emerges out of the Exodus experience. The 'salvation' of the Israelites through the crossing of the Sea against all odds, proves the sovereignty of the LORD to all (vv.16-18). The marginal ones had appealed to the truly free and sovereign GOD when they were exploited and oppressed and the Lord asserts that sovereignty (vv.24-31).

The story of Exodus shows a radical criticism and dismantling of empirical power. In the beginning the Egyptians are in full power. They act as masters of their own destiny (Ex.5:7-10). By the end of the story, the hard-driving taskmasters are vanquished, humiliated and removed from history. The religious claims of the Egyptians' gods have been nullified by the Lord, the GOD of true liberation. New energy is released to trust in the darkness. The Israelite's GOD, in the dark moments of the people's history, proves more powerful than the other gods who seem to rule in the light.

**response: Psalm = Exodus 15 : 1 – 6, 17 – 18**<sup>7</sup>

[ the song of Moses ]

*I will sing to the LORD, for He has triumphed gloriously;  
horse and rider He has thrown into the sea.(1b)*

*The LORD is my strength and my might,  
and He has become my salvation;*

*this is my GOD, and I will praise Him,  
my father's GOD, and I will exalt Him.(2)*

*The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is His name.(3)*

*Pharaoh's chariots and his army He cast into the sea;  
his picked officers were sunk in the Red Sea.(4)*

*The floods covered them;*

<sup>7</sup> Ex.15:1-21 a canticle (used in Christian liturgy) celebrating the Lord's saving power; miraculously delivering the people from their enemies, and leading them to the victorious conquest of the Promised Land.

*they went down into the depths like a stone.(5)  
 Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power -  
 Your right hand, O LORD, shattered the enemy.(6) . . .  
 You brought them in and planted them  
 on the mountain of Your own possession,  
 the place, O LORD, that You made Your abode,  
 the sanctuary, O LORD, that Your hands have established.(17)  
 The LORD will reign forever and ever.(18)*

A hymn of praise is the final full act of the new humanity in freedom and justice now possible. The poetry evokes this alternative against a management mentality that seeks control and mastery. Speaking the name anew of the free and holy One, redefines the Israelite preception of social reality. The energy that moves the Israelites comes out of the freedom of GOD. The singers focus on the free ONE. In their singing they appropriate the freedom of the LORD as their own freedom. The singing reviews their unlikely history. It is a history that would never be taught in the imperial schools of Egypt. The singing culminates in the enthronement of the LORD. That is the reality that the Egyptian empire could not permit or tolerate.

**third reading: Isaiah 55 : 1 - 11**

[ an invitation to abundant life ]

*Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.(1) Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.(2) Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.(3) See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.(4) See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your GOD, the Holy One of Israel, for He has glorified you.(5) Seek the LORD while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near;(6) let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our GOD, for He will abundantly pardon.(7) For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. (8) For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.(9) For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,(10) so shall My WORD be that goes out from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.(11)*

The alternative reality, suggested by the prophet, is the memory of *manna*. That memory becomes the basis of hope, many centuries later, in the midst of

exile. The poet wants the listeners to imagine a situation in which bread can be given to the hungry outside the delivery system of Babylonian control. The poetry is addressed to those who had accepted the Babylonian reality, inviting the listeners to disengage from it. The poetry amounts to delegitimising that authority (vv.3b-5). Isaiah dares to think about a future time when there will be no hunger because food will be given for everyone. It will be the fulfillment of the Word of promise in the Covenant relationship. It will show that the Lord is in control, delivering to the people, what Babylon clearly can't deliver. The exiles feel abandoned and believe that ancient Covenant had failed. There was little to attract them in the prophet's words of invitation. But the prophet affirms that the LORD's WORD of commitment to the Covenant promises is alive and still in effect (v.3).

The WORD of GOD is now to be expressed in the rise of Persia under Cyrus.<sup>8</sup> The prophet insists that the old traditions count, so he declares that *Exodus* (*Is.43:1-7*) is still the characteristic way that the LORD acts. Having said that, the present moment brings the old tradition to fruition, the prophet calls Israel-in-exile to make a decision (v.6). It is possible to act as though the LORD is not in charge of history and stay in exile, or to affirm GOD's reign and risk going home – even if led by a despised non-Israelite (*Is.45:9-13*). Obviously the decision is based on how the people discern the present and trust the tradition. The prophet can only set the issue.

Homecoming is a community owning a new world which can be embraced in liturgy and can be practised concretely here and now. Poems of alternative worlds present the greatest threat to the empire, especially poems that speak about a new economy. The prophet's WORD invites those who are beaten, broken and despairing to a return in imagination to where work and life are not lived in vain. The WORD of the prophet attests that this dreamed-of new world is more powerful, more humane and finally, more real, than the world of the empire where GOD doesn't rule.

**response: Psalm = Isaiah 12 : 2 – 6**

[ thanksgiving and praise ]

*Surely GOD is my salvation;  
I will trust, and will not be afraid,  
for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might;  
He has become my salvation.(2)  
With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.(3)  
And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the LORD,  
call on His name; make known His deeds among the nations;  
proclaim that His name is exalted.(4)  
Sing praises to the LORD, for He has done gloriously;  
let this be known in all the Earth.(5)*

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Is.45:1*

*Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,  
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.(6)*

The speaker expresses hope that all distortions will be overcome. It is a world where there is no cause for anxious greed, for all will be shared, and all will have enough. That's a deep threat to the way we have organized the world. Yet it is a new world that liberates, and for which we yearn – like the speaker. It's a world free of restlessness and greed, where we can sing and pray about the coming of GOD's reigning. The speaker expresses the hope that the entire world is now safely held in the promise of the LORD. In the coming world of GOD's reigning, there can be joy and trustful security.

**fourth reading: Ezekiel 36 : 16 – 28**

[ the renewal of Israel ]

*The WORD of the LORD came to me:(16) Mortal, when the house of Israel lived on their own soil, they defiled it with their ways and their deeds; their conduct in my sight was like the uncleanness of a woman in her menstrual period.(17) So I poured out my wrath upon them for the blood that they had shed upon the land, and for the idols with which they had defiled it. (18) I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed through the countries; in accordance with their conduct and their deeds I judged them.(19) But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that it was said of them, "These are the people of the LORD, and yet they had to go out of His land."(20) But I had concern for My holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came.(21) Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the LORD GOD; It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of My holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came.(22) I will sanctify My great name, which has been profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD, says the LORD GOD, when through you I display My holiness before their eyes.(23). I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land.(24) I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.(25) A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.(26) I will put My spirit within you, and make you follow My statutes and be careful to observe My ordinances.(27) Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be My people, and I will be your GOD.(28)*

The LORD's new act is on a different basis. It is no longer to value a people or even to keep a promise, but it is for God's own sake and reputation (Ezk.36:20-28). If a new history is now to begin, the ground for it must be rooted in GOD and not in the Israelites. Nothing is required or expected of them. The will for land by

them is rooted in the LORD's very character as a covenant-maker and keeper. GOD no longer thinks that obedience will yield a new existence in the land.

The motif of repentance is transformed to that of gifting, '*a new heart and new spirit*' (v.26). Now the possibility of land is exclusively GOD's initiative. The LORD works, as it were from both sides of the relationship; not only to address the Israelites but also to assure their response. "*You shall dwell in the land*" and "*You shall be my people and I will be your GOD*", go together (v.28). The idea of being in a place and being in a covenant relationship with GOD, go together. The prophet cannot imagine covenant apart from the land. Therefore what follows is not only about covenant, but about land. The description of land echoes the imagery of creation as well as the speeches on the threshold of taking possession of the promised land in Genesis.<sup>9</sup>

response: Psalm 42 : 1 – 2, 4 & 43 : 3 – 4<sup>10</sup>

[ longing for God and His help in distress ]

*As a deer longs for flowing streams,  
so my soul longs for You, O GOD.(1)  
My soul thirsts for GOD, for the living GOD.  
When shall I come and behold the face of God?(2) . . .  
These things I remember, as I pour out my soul:  
how I went with the throng,  
and led them in procession to the house of GOD,  
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,  
a multitude keeping festival.(4) . . .  
O send out Your light and Your truth; let them lead me;  
let them bring me to Your holy hill and to Your dwelling.(43:3)  
Then I will go to the altar of GOD, to GOD my exceeding joy;  
and I will praise You with the harp, O GOD, my GOD.(4)*

The speaker laments being absent from Jerusalem and being excluded from worship in the Temple. It is another expression of the felt need for the '*new heart*' of Ezekiel. The speaker expresses the worshipper's sense of GOD's felt absence and longs to participate in the liturgy and be restored to the presence of the holy One.<sup>11</sup> It is another reference to the need for the new heart of Ezekiel. Participation in the action around the altar would mark the supreme moment when those who have been alienated are able to share in the action where sins are forgiven through the power of the holy ONE.

9 Cf. Gn.1:22 & 8:17

10 Pss. 42 & 43 form a single lament in three sections, each section ending in an identical refrain (Pss.42:6, 11[12]; 43:5). The psalmist is in the extreme north of Israel, far from Jerusalem, and longs for the divine presence that Israel experienced in the temple liturgy. Despite sadness, the psalmist hopes once again to join the worshipping crowds.

11 [v.2] '*Behold the face of God*' where '*face*' designates a personal presence (cf. Gn.33:10; Ex.10:28-29; 2 S.17:11). The expressions, "*see God/God's face*" occurs elsewhere (Ps.11:7; 17:15; 63:2; cf Ex.24:10; 33:7-11; Jb.33:26) for the presence of God in the temple.

**new testament reading: Romans 6: 3 – 11**

[ dying and rising with Christ ]

*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death?(3) Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.(4) For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.(5) We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.(6) For whoever has died is freed from sin.(7) But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.(8) We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.(9) The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to GOD.(10) So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to GOD in Christ Jesus. (11)*

Paul links forgiveness of sins and the freedom from sin very closely to Baptism (vv.3-7). In our world it is difficult, if not impossible, to succeed in business without cutting corners. If dishonesty does not enter into the process of production and sales, there is a tendency to cheat on taxes. This attitude is so widespread that it is taken completely for granted. In 'accepted practices' we have an example of what Paul means by the 'compulsive' and deadly power of sin. Such dishonesty is condoned by society. Everyone tacitly conforms. Christians, imbued with Jesus' spirit/Spirit from the gospel, immediately become aware of this pressure once they try to resist sin. To be under pressure is to be unfree, because 'freedom from' implies lack of compulsion or restraint. Yet Christians are told every Sunday, that simply because they have been baptised, they are free. When they venture to express doubts, they are merely told they must strengthen their faith by prayer.

Paul's point in relating 'freedom from' sin to baptism (v.4) is clear when we recognise that baptism is *a rite of initiation*. It is the solemn entrance into the community of believers. It is by focusing on this aspect that we can begin to understand how the apostle conceived 'freedom from' sin. Paul inherited from his Israelite background the idea that the new community of GOD's *Messiah*, would be entirely free from sin. Ezekiel clarified that tradition and promise, with the words, "I will put my spirit within you . . .," (Ezk.36:27).

From Paul's perspective, the Christian community is an environment in which no one sins; in which all are authentic; and no one lives inauthentically (vv.8-11). The apostle envisaged individuals being changed by absorption into the unity of the Christian community. For Paul, "being alive in Christ Jesus" (v.11) is understood as referring to the community.<sup>12</sup> It is in the communal Christ that new being becomes

<sup>12</sup> God's display of generosity or grace is not evoked by sin but, as stated in *Rm.5:8* is the expression of God's love, and this love pledges eternal life to all believers (Cf. *Rm.5:21*). Paul views the present

possible. The veil of sin and death is lifted, by the implication that the liberated one gains membership of the Christian community. Paul often terms the community, '*Christ*', enabling his readers to make sense of the expression, "*to be baptised into Christ*" (v.3). It simply means to be admitted into the community through submission to the sacramental rite of initiation. *The power-for-life* of the risen Christ operates through this communal act, enabling those initiated to "*die to sin and rise to newness of life*" (v.4). In other places, Paul speaks of, "*putting on Christ*." What Paul has in mind is clarified by the parallel expression, "*You have put on a new self*".<sup>13</sup> The '*new self*' can only be the community. Christ is the new humanness which is the community. That means in practice that, '*to put on Christ*' is '*freedom for*' an alternative life of neighbour love.

**response: Psalm 118 : 1 – 2, 16 – 17, 22 – 23**

[ a song of victory ]

*O give thanks to the LORD, for He is good;  
His steadfast love endures forever!(1) Let Israel say,  
"His steadfast love endures forever."(2) . . .  
The right hand of the LORD is exalted;  
the right hand of the LORD does valiantly."(16)  
I shall not die, but I shall live,  
and recount the deeds of the LORD.(17) . . .  
The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the chief cornerstone.(22)  
This is the LORD's doing;  
it is marvelous in our eyes.(23)*

A song of thanksgiving sung by one whose life has been under threat, and who has now been delivered by God. The original setting was most likely Jerusalem, at a time of special significance – the autumn festival – "*the day that the holy One has made*" (v.24). In that setting, '*the gate of the Lord*' (v.20) is the gate of the city or of the temple. The speaker's hopeless position has been transformed by the Lord's radical intervention. In the context of Easter, the modern Christian community reads this song as the voice of Jesus, who has been beset by the powers of death. It is only by the greater power of God that the life of Jesus is wrenched out of the grip of death. "*YHWH is my strength . . . , my might . . . , my salvation*" (v.14) echoes the language of Moses, who celebrated the Lord's massive defeat of the Egyptians (Ex.15:1-3).

---

conduct of the believers from the perspective of God's completed salvation when the body is resurrected and directed totally by the holy Spirit. Through baptism believers share the death of Christ and thereby escape from the grip of sin. Through the resurrection of Christ the power to live anew becomes reality for them, but the fullness of participation in Christ's resurrection still lies in the future. But life that is lived in dedication to God now is part and parcel of that future. Hence anyone who sincerely claims to be interested in that future will scarcely be able to say, "*Let us sin so that grace may prosper*" (cf Rm.6:1)

13 Cf. Col.3:10

The Lord's recent rescue becomes the speaker's ground for hope. *'The righteous'* does not necessarily mean the good and the pious. The righteous are those who have been rescued and vindicated by God (v.20). The rescued community consists of those who have known the Lord's massive intervention on their behalf and who now live their lives in a delighted response to their rescue. They are *'righteous'* because of what they have received, rather than because of what they have done.

**gospel reading: Matthew 28 : 1 – 10**<sup>14</sup>

[ the resurrection of Jesus ]

*After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, went to see the tomb.(1) And suddenly there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the LORD, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.(2) His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow.(3) For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.(4) But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified.(5) He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.(6) Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you."(7) So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples.(8) Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him.(9) Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers and sisters to go to Galilee; there they will see me."(10)*

Matthew concludes his account of Jesus. Mary of Magdala and Mary, the mother of James, visit the tomb where the body of Jesus had been laid. None of the gospel accounts tell how Jesus was raised by GOD. Matthew mentions an earthquake and an angel, who rolls away the stone. The different gospel accounts agree that Jesus was raised by GOD to the surprise of Jesus' disciples.

In those times nobody paid much attention to women. Their role was only to weep and embalm bodies – but according to Matthew, the angel spoke to the women (vv.5-8). The women had found the tomb of Jesus empty. Instead of their traditional humble role – they are assigned by the angel, to witness to the resurrection. In the age of GOD's reigning, if the powers of death are not conquered, it makes no sense to conquer anything else! Without resurrection, the forward movement towards GOD's reigning has stalled!

Because of the news of this resurrection, the apostle Paul can later say that the last enemy we have to conquer will be death (1 Co.15:26). The womens' message of, *'awe and joy'*, is consolation to all who won't see the triumph of GOD's reigning – all humnaity that have died, all living creatures who have given themselves for humanity, who will never see the triumph of the revolution in their lifetime, who are dying for it and won't see its triumph!

<sup>14</sup> *Mt.28:1-8 is based on Mk.16:1-8. But even where he follows Mark, Matthew alters his source so greatly that a different impression is given from that of Mark's account. There are two points common to the resurrection testimony of all the gospels: that the tomb of Jesus had been found empty; and that the risen Jesus had appeared to certain persons. Or, in the original form of Mark, that such an appearance was promised to soon to take place (Mk.16:7).*

The ultimate failure of humanity, is the failure of all creation. That is why Paul speaks of, *'the whole creation until this time, has been groaning in labour pains. And not only that: we too . . . , are groaning inside ourselves, waiting with eagerness for our bodies to be set free'*.<sup>15</sup> We are the conscience of Nature and with the death of humanity, Nature dies in the sense that it could no longer be aware or be in love.

The women in this account are the first to be charged with the task of carrying the news of liberation from the power of death to those who are dying and won't see the triumph of GOD's power for life-giving over the power of death – in the death/resurrection of Jesus (vv.9-10).

Matthew's account brings together the traditions of the empty tomb and the appearances of the Risen Jesus and locates the appearance in Jerusalem. The testimony of the resurrection rests upon the eyewitness of the women there. They reported the empty tomb; the appearance of Jesus; and the need to look for him outside Jerusalem. According to Matthew, the women had a primary and essential role to play, in witnessing to the resurrection of Jesus. Mary Magdala has for this reason been called, *'apostle to the apostles'*.

**prayer:**<sup>16</sup>

*Dear friends in Christ, on this most holy night  
when Jesus Christ passed from death to life,  
the Church invites us to come together in vigil and prayer.  
This is the passover of the LORD:  
if we keep the memory of his death and resurrection  
by hearing his WORD and celebrating his mysteries,  
then we may be confident  
that we shall share his victory over death;  
and live with him for ever in GOD. Amen.*

-----0000000-----

---

<sup>15</sup> *Rm.8:22-23*

<sup>16</sup> The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.