

On Easter Day two years ago I experienced the greatest joy as a priest when I baptised my granddaughter Adeline. I would like to share with you what I wrote as my homily for that day:

*Easter 2018.*

Dear Adeline,

Today you are to be baptised. Being only fourteen weeks old you won't remember me pouring water over your head three times and baptising you with the eternal words – Father Son and Holy Spirit. You won't remember the touch of my thumb as I make the sign of the cross on your forehead with the oil of chrism, marking you as one of Christ's own forever, or the flickering candle reminding you to shine your light in this world through which you walk. But even though your conscious memory will not retain this moment it is a moment in which your life will be changed profoundly. Always a child of God you now become a Christian, an inheritor of Jesus promise of eternal life. Your life story has become part of the life of Christ expressed in his church.

It is no coincidence that you are being baptised on Easter Day, because it is this day that is the most sacred of all days and the day that defines our faith. In the church of the third and fourth centuries candidates would be baptised at dawn and then leave the baptistery and enter the church where they would take their first communion. The Orthodox church maintains elements of that tradition even today when tiny babies are baptised and given their first communion of wine and honey from a tiny golden spoon, but sorry Adeline, no wine and honey for you.

Today is the day when we remember the morning over two thousand years ago when the world was changed forever. I know this is a big statement but so powerful was the experience of encounter with the risen Jesus that it spawned the birth of the Christian church as the power of the Holy Spirit transformed the lives of thousands of people. Miracles occurred and in every community in which Jesus disciples gathered more lives were transformed by the way in which these disciples spread God's love. This is the community into which you are baptised. Your candle is a reminder to you that, as you grow older, you become part of God's mission in this world.

Undoubtedly you will be told by many people that you encounter as you grow older that being a Christian isn't cool, that it is all superstitious rubbish that has no place in the modern world. Let me assure you that two thousand years of experience says otherwise. My mere sixty five years tells me otherwise. The whole notion of resurrection is so farfetched as to be thought of as physically impossible, and yet Jesus appeared to so many people, walked with them, talked with them, and ate with them, that their combined testimony convinced a doubting world. The written history of the time records the rapid spread of groups of people who lived under the Roman Emperor yet adopted a new way of living, a way in which the strong looked after the weak and the rich gave away their possessions to the poor. As a Christian you are called on to be a revolutionary, to be countercultural, and to look at the world in a way that is counter to the prevailing culture that dominates our lives.

Adeline, if I could sum up the meaning of Easter day in one word, that word would be hope. After the events of Friday, despair would have been the feeling of those women who had been standing at the foot of the cross, who had embalmed and placed in a shroud the body of a man whom they had loved deeply. Jesus had fallen victim to the brutality of Rome and the political expediency of the Jewish high priests. Jesus had challenged the existing order by showing the world what God really wanted us to be; showing us the hypocrisy of the religious establishment and by breaking down so many of the taboos in society that caused suffering and misery.

But the system had won, Jesus had been tortured and executed in the most brutal way and evil had prevailed. But on that morning when Mary made her way to the tomb of our Lord a surprise awaited her. An angel appeared and opened the tomb which, to her shock, was empty. The angel explained that Jesus had been raised from the dead and was on his way to Galilee. The two Mary's shock is then compounded by an encounter with the risen Jesus to whose feet they drop and take hold of him. Remember Adeline, it was a woman who recognised Jesus when the men just ran past him in blind panic.

Jesus' resurrection is central to our faith. Without it Jesus is reduced to being a great teacher, healer and prophet who tried to change the world around him but failed. Jesus' resurrection fulfils God's promise to us that His Kingdom is real and is changing the world. Human history continues to bear witness to all sorts of evil in which people attempt to build up kingdoms here on Earth by exercising brute force and fostering all manner of horror. But human history also records that such kingdoms and empires based on tyranny are temporary, and that, just as Jesus prevailed against evil two thousand years ago, so by the ongoing power of his love, are we able to prevail today.

Without the resurrection to point the way I think that we too could be forgiven for yielding to despair just like Jesus' disciples, but every year Easter reminds us that the Son of God triumphed not only over evil but death also. In the Roman Catacombs of the first and second centuries frescoes reveal that, for the early Christians, they believed that they too, like Christ would be resurrected sustained them through their persecution. Today, when we try to make sense of our world we remember that no matter what evil people can foment, God's love will win out in the end. Easter brings with it the reassurance that it will be all right in the end, not only for us but also for our world.

That is the hope that today brings. Today you will be made one with Christ through baptism. The fight against evil in this world will be one to which you are recruited, but in that fight he will be empowered by the gifts of baptism. We have sung the word Hallelujah this morning. This Hebrew word is an expression of praise to God, and was preserved untranslated by the early Christians as a superlative expression of thanksgiving, joy, and triumph. It literally means thanks God.

Today we thank God for the gift of hope in a world of despair. We thank God for you and for all who will be baptised or confirmed today, because you give hope for the future. Where it seems that life is ebbing away, new life appears. Next year you will probably get your first

Easter Egg. As you grow older I hope that you understand that the egg is a potent symbol for the meaning of Easter. Out of the egg comes new life in the form of a chicken or a duck or any of a multitude of birds. This seemingly lifeless object springs forth with new life. Our church needs to be a place of hope in a world of despair, a place of peace in a world full of violence, a place of love, in a world full of hate and above all a place of new life for all.

So why is today the most important day in the life of a Christian? It is because today gives meaning to the rest of the Christian story. The horror of Good Friday was and is real, but now we shout Hallelujah because the bad guys didn't win after all. Jesus, who we thought was dead, is alive! The special child grew into a special man, Jesus the Christ, the anointed one, the son of God and finally we understand why God had to do what God did for us.

Today we celebrate the fact that Satan and evil no longer have the last word in this world of ours. Jesus, who was dead is alive again, and not only that, he comes promising that all who believe in him will share that eternal life with him and it is into this inheritance that you have been baptised.

Love,

Pa.

