

Festal Eucharist
Easter Day
Mother Emma

“Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia!”

So we sang in our first hymn, joining together in the shout of praise and thanksgiving with Christians all across the world, whether they celebrate Easter today or next Sunday, rejoicing together that Christ has burst from the tomb, overcoming the power of death and bringing hope and new life to us all.

This week we have walked together through the solemnity and darkness of Holy Week, remembering Judas’ betrayal, Christ’s trial and condemnation, and his terrible death. Those who visited the church on Good Friday will have been struck as we were by the unlit church, with all its decorations stripped away, and candles left unlit. Yet, as Fr Christopher and I said Evening Prayer together in the darkened church, after all the powerful services of the day, a shaft of evening sunlight struck the wooden Cross at the top of the chancel steps, a beautiful and moving reminder that even in the darkest hour, as Christ lies in the tomb, we can be aware that hope is never extinguished.

Two years ago – my first Easter as Vicar here - I preached online from my garden just a couple of weeks into the first lockdown, and I recalled the words of Pope John Paul II in 1986, paraphrasing the teaching of St Augustine: “Do not abandon yourselves to despair. We are an Easter people, and Alleluia is our song.”

Today we are reunited in church, with all the singing and community and even the refreshments after the service restored, and we have much to celebrate. Yet we cannot but be aware of the terrible conflicts continuing across the world; of those places where Easter Day will dawn amidst destruction and pain and loss. Not for them this year the glory of the flowers, the candles, the wonderful music, the sense of joy and anticipation; yet as we think of them with compassion and care, we can pray that, through the love of the risen Christ, they may have a glimpse of the sunlight falling on the Cross, of the eternal hope which is promised to us all. And we too, filled with our own hope and inspiration are called, day after day as Easter people, to build God’s kingdom of peace and justice here on earth – to reach out, to welcome, to give, to heal and to help, just as Christ himself has done for us.

One of the most potent moments of Easter is the sacrament of baptism, and we are delighted that last night, at the Easter Vigil, we baptised Alex (who may not wish me to reveal his age, but who is very much a grown-up!), and this morning, we shall be baptising Hayley, still a child, but one whose baptism has had to be postponed almost two years by the pandemic to allow her family to join us. The baptism this morning will give each one of us the opportunity to remember (or at least to give thanks for if we don’t strictly remember it) our own baptism, and the promises made by us or on our behalf.

The symbolic actions and objects we see during the baptism are all vivid reminders of the glorious story we celebrate today. As we pour the water over Hayley’s head, we are reminded both of birth and death, and as she is lifted up afterwards, we see that for her too, a new life as a Christian has begun. Fr Christopher will sprinkle all of us with water from the font, so that we too may remember and renew our promises.

Before the baptism, Hayley will be anointed with the oil of baptism, oil which was blessed just three days ago at St Paul’s Cathedral by the Bishop of London, and brought back by the priests of every parish, to use throughout the year – a symbol of the unity of the Church.

At the end of the service, Hayley will be given a lighted candle. Last night, as darkness in the church was replaced by the first glimpses of Easter light, we lit the Easter Fire outside, lit our Paschal candle from it, and carried it into the church, where it burns here prominently today and throughout

Easter tide. Hayley's candle – and those of all children baptised throughout the year, will be lit from this candle, as signs that her new life in Christ is filled with Christ's new Resurrection life, in which we all live.

The events of Holy Week remind us that, even for Christ's followers, life can hold difficulties and darkness. We cannot expect that from the day of our baptism, everything will go without a hitch. Christians across the world bear testimony to the fact that our faith itself may prove a dangerous thing, and over the last two years, the whole world has witnessed events and anxieties we might never have foreseen.

Yet the baptism which echoes the joy of Christ's new Resurrection life does promise us two things. We travel together "within the company of Christ's pilgrim people", surrounded by our fellow Christians, many of whom we may never meet. And Christ himself travels with us, every step of the way, through joy and sadness, so that we are daily renewed by his anointing Spirit.

He is himself the shaft of sunlight on the Cross of suffering, just as he is here today in the glory, the beauty and the joy.

Alleluia, Christ is risen! He is risen indeed, Alleluia!