

A surprise? Easter Vigil 2021

Well, happy Easter. He is risen. Were you surprised? I don't suppose many of you were, although what we have just been doing was trying to act out the amazement, the unexpected glory of the Easter story. We have waited in the darkness- well as dark as it gets in our street lit village, listened to stories and poems- and perhaps been a bit bored at the length of them (think yourself lucky, there's about readings set for this evening), but perhaps we've shared a bit the experience of the disciples engulfed by the darkness of the tomb, and then we have together broken up the darkness with light, the light of candles and the electric lights, and with music, singing, and joy on the organ. The trouble is, we knew that was what was going to happen. We've acted out surprise, but we haven't been surprised. We knew the story all along, so we can never get back to the feelings of the women as described in the gospels. We hear the strong words used to portray them – 'amazed, trembling, astonished, afraid.'

Actually of course the point of a service like this is not to surprise us, but to give us what we need to make sense of things when the really surprising thing happens – that is, when the risen Jesus meets us in our ordinary life outside the church. It happens, but, surprise!, we can't predict exactly when.

At the end of 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe,' when Lucy is trying to find out when she will next see Aslan, the lion who is Narnia's version of Jesus, she is told 'He'll be coming and going. One day you'll see him and another you won't...He'll often drop in. Only you mustn't press him. He's wild, you know. Not like a *tame* lion.'

Now that he has risen from the dead, Jesus is free, and that means we can't predict or control his movements. Sometimes we'll try a routine which we thought would be guaranteed to put us in touch with him – a favourite prayer or song, a special service which always makes us feel nice and holy - and we'll get no sense of his presence at all. But then another time, just when we are feeling stressed or anxious or even engaged in something totally outside his will, Jesus will be there, calling us back, making a difference. He's not a tame lion. The surprises are out there, waiting for you. You can trust Jesus for that. All that this service can do is to make you alert, aware of the reality of Jesus, ready to recognise him when he comes, ready to respond and join with him in whatever he is doing.

This means that perhaps the most important bit of this service is the bit we haven't done yet. The Easter Vigil is a preparation for Easter. It gets us ready to celebrate the Resurrection together at Communion tomorrow morning. But it does this, not by telling us the story, or even by getting us to act out the story with lights and music – of course, we already know the story. What this service does is to put us into the story, to remind us that this is a story which is still going on, and we are in it. So the most important part of the service is our renewal of baptismal vows. When we remake those promises, we are saying to Jesus, 'I want to be part of what you did at Easter and are still doing today. I don't want just to know and pretend and act out you dying and rising again in Jerusalem all those years ago. I want you to die and rise in me, now, today.'

For when you were baptised, that is what happened. Jesus kept his promise to come and dwell in you and you in him.

With Jesus active and living in your heart, the surprises will be piling up. All you have to do is be ready to expect the unexpected, and to respond to everything Jesus sends you with all the love and faith you have.