



EASTER VIGIL MASS 2008

1. It was Sunday morning and Jesus was crucified on the Friday. Let us accompany Mary of Magdala and Mary, mother of James, as the two women approach the tomb where Jesus had been laid. Their memories of what had happened on the Friday are still very raw. They had seen his body taken down from the cross and placed in this tomb. Now they come in sadness to the burial place; all that was left was to show how much he had meant to them by anointing his body with spices (*Mk 16:1; Lk 24:1*).

2. The angel's extraordinary words terrified them and must have burned into their minds and hearts. One can imagine them repeating the words. In fact, it's easy to imagine that, for the rest of their lives, they were ready to repeat them to anyone and everyone who would listen:

'He is not here, for he has risen as he said he would. Come and see the place where he lay; then go quickly and tell his disciples. He has risen from the dead and now he is going ahead of you to Galilee. That is where you will see him.'

3. ***"He is not here"*** – not in the tomb – that place of sadness and terrible memories. He is risen from the dead. We hear these words, which are very familiar. But it would be easy to miss the wonder of it all.

The Gospel tells us that the women were ***'filled with awe and great joy'***. And that was even before they saw Jesus coming to meet them.

4. The accounts of Easter Sunday pay great attention to the empty tomb. The angel invited them to come and see the place where Jesus lay. When the apostles heard the women's news, they came running and they ***'saw the linen cloths on the ground'***. They saw and they believed. The tomb was no longer a tomb. Is it likewise for us? Are we aware that Jesus is alive and offers hope to each one of us?

5. The Sequence of Easter expresses it like this:
***'Death with Life contended: combat strangely ended!
Life's own Champion slain, yet lives to reign.'***

6. Everything has changed, changed utterly. The one inescapable, inevitable, unconquerable reality - the reality of death - had seemed to defeat Jesus as it had defeated every human being, every living thing on earth. But the reality now is that *Jesus conquered death*.

7. We must hold on to the hope of these words: *Jesus conquered death!* We need to hold onto this truth today because death takes on so many guises;

- through legalised abortion – that kills nearly 200,000 children a year,
- through experimentation on the unborn, that has resulted in the deaths of 2.2 million,

- and euthanasia through the withdrawal of food and fluids, here the numbers are countless.

Jesus *has* conquered death, but the powers of death and evil still strive to overcome the light of love and life.

The tragedy is that the authority and power of Government seem to be behind the greatest threat to the dignity and rights of human life.

As your bishop, I want to join my voice to that of Cardinal Keith O'Brien and others, in protesting in the strongest terms against the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill.

If this bill becomes the law of the land, it will allow the creation of animal-human hybrid embryos for medical experimentation.

Supporters of this so called 'medical' experimentation, justify it by offering the hope that at some unknown date in the future the dissection and destruction of unborn human life will lead to cures for truly terrible diseases, such as cancers, Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's and M.S.

All right thinking people will agree that we must seek to discover cures for diseases that cause so much human suffering. But compassion cannot result in us exploiting and destroying the life of unborn human beings.

Many in government, the media and research are so strident in promoting research on embryonic humans that they forget to mention that the greatest strides in discovering cures derive from adult stem cell research - not the defenceless unborn.

We need to ask who are these vested interests in the promotion of experimentation on embryonic humans and the creation of animal-human hybrids. I read about them but I've yet to find them in person.

The Prime Minister has made it clear that he wants Britain to be the world's number one centre for genetic and stem cell research. He sees it as building up the hi-tech sector of British industry and contributing to economic growth.

It is good to develop British industry and foster economic growth, but not through exploiting and destroying embryonic human persons.

A society that seeks medical cures and economic development at the cost of human rights, human dignity and human life is 'monstrous'.

It is not the defenceless, human-animal embryo, that is 'monstrous'; it is we ourselves who have become 'monsters' for allowing the exploitation of the unborn for our economic and medical gain.

On this holy night when we celebrate life conquering death, I want to make two appeals as your Bishop:

First, to the Prime Minister and his ministers. Please stop the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill. Stop exploiting embryonic human beings, and support adult stem cell research instead.

Prime Minister, if you insist on promoting this bill through parliament, allow members of your government and party to vote according to their consciences.

Second, I call on the Catholic community - clergy and laity - to speak with one voice and insist that parliament: **protects** and **cherishes** human life.

Pray, **Protest**, and **Petition** your Member of Parliament to stop this monstrous medical experimentation on human beings.

Never give up hope, nor allow it to be dimmed, because the light of Christ shines out in the darkness, and the darkness can never overcome Him.

8. We began our vigil outside the cathedral with the Easter Candle spreading its light through the darkness. We processed singing “Christ our Light!” In the Scriptures we heard how God rescued Israel from the Egyptians and how promised to quench their thirst by sending his Word, his Son. Tonight this promise is being fulfilled and we are given a new depth to that truth.

9. Only Jesus can satisfy our thirst and in a way that no human being had ever imagined. Here was a light that the darkness could never overpower. This was something far above and beyond our ways and thoughts.

10. It is so much beyond our ways and thoughts that we think about it with a strange, contradictory set of attitudes. On the one hand, we can take it for granted as if it were, almost something to be expected. We have heard the Easter story all our lives; we know that Jesus rose from the dead.

On the other hand, though we treat it so familiarly, we do not really let the wonder of what we are celebrating sink in. There is no more amazing truth than this, yet how far does it transform our lives and our attitudes?

11. Jesus has passed beyond suffering, death and graveyards into a life which is no longer subject to death. The Lord rescued Israel from the Egyptians, but for us he has done something even more extraordinary; the Lord rescued us from death. We live with him; we live a life that death cannot touch. Death has no more power over us. Death must give way to the resurrection as it did for Jesus.

That is the Gospel, the Good News. The Lord is risen indeed, alleluia!

+Patrick O'Donoghue, Bishop of Lancaster