

Easter Vigil, Epistle, Year A

THE EASTER VIGIL PROCESSION

Romans 6:3-11

Easter Vigil

Analysis by Bruce K Modahl

3Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4Therefore 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.

5For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. 6We 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. 7For whoever has died is freed from sin. 8But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. 9We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. 10The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. 11So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

DIAGNOSIS: Darkness

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Walking in Death's Shadow

For the Easter Vigil we gather in the church's memorial garden or graveyard. We gather in the darkness. The problem the text sets before us is death. We gather in the graveyard to strike the first light of Easter. The small light atop the Paschal candle proclaims to us a promise, "A light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it." Is the promise true? The light does not reach into the corners. It does not

touch all who gather. At best it lights the ground under the one carrying the candle. The rest of us stumble as we walk from the grave in the shadow of death. We will be back. I promise.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): The Witness of Scripture

We take our seats to hear the witness of Scripture. King Nebuchadnezzar is quite taken with himself, golden, sixty cubits high, and six cubits wide. He is quite taken with his authority, the satraps, prefects, treasurers, justices, magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces. He is convinced of his lordship by the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble and by the sight of those who fall down to worship his image. If the text is read well, by the second time through the list we begin to giggle as the text mocks the pretense of human authority. Nevertheless, most bow down to worship. They place their faith in Nebuchadnezzar. What choice do they have? He rules by the power to constrict. That is the ultimate power of all earthly authority.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Lord Death

The key word in the text appears in verse 9. When the text is read we hear the words "has dominion." However, the verb is lord. Death lords us. It fulfills its promise graveside.

PROGNOSIS: A New Commonwealth

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Lord Jesus

Paul says, "Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father." Death no longer is Lord. Jesus is. His victory was not a one off. Rather his victory signals the end of the era in which death holds sway. It is not what cosmologists propose for the end of creation when it collapses in on itself or dissipates into nothingness. The end of death's dominion marks the beginning of a new commonwealth of light and life. When Christ

comes again the new commonwealth comes into its fullness. No hint remains of the old aeon. Kasemann writes, "His reign finds expression precisely in the justification of the ungodly as the sphere of the commenced new creation. Even now, then, we participate in the life of the future world" (Romans, p. 155).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Joined to Christ Death no longer has the power to determine how our lives turn out. Rather, Jesus' death and resurrection determine the outcome for all who believe. We live in the overlap of the sphere of death's dominion and the new creation of Jesus' reign. At baptism Christ's death and resurrection intrude into our lives. Dying and rising, the pattern of his life becomes the pattern for ours. We return regularly to our baptism when we confess our sins. During the Easter Vigil we process to the baptismal font. The lighting is only slightly better than the place we sat for the readings. We gather around the font for the baptism of the catechumens and to renew our baptismal vows. The presiding minister liberally sprinkles us with the cleansing water. I acknowledge we live in an age in which many do not think they have sins that need to be confessed. Death's dominion makes itself known also as loss of meaning in our lives, and as alienation from God and others. These we bring to the baptismal font to hand over to Jesus. We ask him to take these and to put them to their eternal rest in his death. By the substantial adherent power of the water of baptism the Holy Spirit joins us also to Jesus' resurrection. Note the verb tenses of verse 5. Paul claims we have been united with Jesus in his death and we will be united with him in a resurrection like his.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Walking in Newness of Life

Kasemann says that even though, "We have yet to participate in the resurrection, its power already rules us and sets us in the new walk" (p. 169). In this new walk we declare the Lordship of

the Crucified. We testify to the validity of the promise of that first light in the graveyard. At the Easter Vigil we do so with high drama. From the baptismal font we walk into the darkened nave. We follow the candlelight carried by the newly baptized. Once the litany is over and we have sung our final, "Lord, have mercy," the light comes on full. We see the nave and area surrounding the altar decorated for Easter. We share the first Lord's Supper of Easter. Christ is present bodily. We go out from there as citizens of the new dispensation and bearers of the light of Christ.