

Homily by Adam Cardinal Maida
EASTER VIGIL
BLESSED SACRAMENT CATHEDRAL
APRIL 7, 2007

*Readings: Genesis 22; Exodus 14:15-15:1; Isaiah 55:1-1;
Romans 6:3-11; Luke 24:1-12*

My brother Bishops and Priests, Deacons and Religious, Seminarians, those to be Baptized and those making Professions of Faith, Family and Friends from the Cathedral Cluster:

On this most holy night of the Church year, we commemorate the rising of Christ from the dead. We believe this event, which took place two thousand years ago, has forever changed our lives and destiny. In tonight's liturgy, we make this event present to us in a sacramental way: the experience of the Passover of the Jews, the Death and Resurrection of Jesus and our own "passing over" from sin to freedom is all part of the drama of tonight's service.

There are many ways to reflect on the beautiful symbolism, message, and meaning contained in tonight's Scriptures and the ritual itself. I would like to invite us to reflect on these mysteries by reference to the theme of freedom. In this Easter Vigil, we commemorate anew our passage from the slavery to sin and every form of human compulsion and addiction. The freedom of the Jewish people from slavery is acted out in our own life and times by the even greater miracle of Christ's Resurrection from the dead. We continue to experience the power of that victory in the Sacraments of Initiation and as we allow the Risen Christ to take over our minds and hearts. This is the night when we celebrate the new freedom we have received through Jesus Christ, the freedom of the Holy Spirit, or as we say each morning in the Canticle of the Benedictus, "*The freedom to worship Him without fear, holy and righteous in His sight.*"

Tonight's first reading from Genesis 22 represents one of the classic moments of Scripture and, indeed, of all literature. Abraham is faced with the terrible dilemma: God has asked him to sacrifice his only son, the one on whom he had pinned all his hopes for the future. Basically, God was testing Abraham and asking him to trust in His providential care and love even when it made no sense. Abraham reached a point of impasse, or what we would often call a "dead end" where there seemed no way out. But then, miraculously God provided a ram for the sacrifice and Isaac's life was spared.

In many ways, the story of Abraham's trial paralleled the trauma of the Jewish people in today's second reading, the beautiful and powerful story of their liberation from Egypt. Precisely when all seemed lost and there was no hope on a human level, God intervened and worked an extraordinary miracle. And of course, the intervention of God to save Isaac from death and the Jewish people from slavery were mere foreshadowings of the far greater miracle of someone rising from the dead.

Even though Abraham was a great man of faith, he still lived in a world overshadowed by fear. His worship was not yet perfect, inasmuch as he did not completely understand the love of God for him. The mountaintop experience with his son Isaac was a partial attempt by God to help him grow into a spirit of greater detachment and freedom. Abraham had to face the complete darkness of his worst fear so that he could begin to discover the light that only God could provide. In much the same way, our service tonight began in darkness as we kindled the Easter fire and processed in semi-darkness following the Easter candle. We cannot know the light of the Lord Jesus until we first recognize our limitations and reject the false lights of this world. Like the Jews of old, the Lord seeks to purify us through the experience of our journey from this world to the Promised Land. For this journey, we must be willing to set aside everything we know and have if we wish to know the freedom of God's love.

Part of the process of coming to spiritual freedom involves facing the truth of human weakness and failure, and our utter dependence on the Lord alone. Such was the challenge of the holy women who went to the tomb. Even their memory of the Lord's prediction of His Resurrection had not been an adequate guide for them; the mystery of the empty tomb completely baffled their imaginations and made no sense until the angel interpreted the event for them. It took them awhile to begin to appreciate the marvelous surprise God had accomplished in raising His Son from the dead. First they had to come to the tomb in semi-darkness, and only then, did the light begin to dawn upon them and through them.

The same process and challenge is true for us: as we face our greatest fears and confess our limitations and failures, we can begin to know the power of the Risen Lord. As we admit our slavery, fear, and addiction, the

inner Spirit of the Risen Lord can be unleashed within us and among us, drawing us closer to Him and to one another. In today's third reading from Isaiah 55, we are reminded of the gracious invitation of our God—that He is always ready to provide all that we need in body or spirit. We simply need to trust Him and His covenant promise. Just as He provides rain and snow so that plants can grow and we have a harvest each year, He is also more than ready to satisfy our spiritual hunger for freedom.

As St. Paul reminds us in the passage from Romans 6, our experience of Baptism literally immerses us into the mystery of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. We go down into the tomb and thus join Jesus in death and as we rise out of the water, we are freed from the slavery of sin. We are filled with the gifts of the spirit, the beginning of life eternal. In tonight's Vigil service, we baptize one adult from St. Gregory Parish, a seven year-old young girl from Madonna Parish, and three month-old twins. We will be welcoming two adults already baptized in another Christian faith and who are now choosing to share our Catholic faith, and we will also be confirming one adult Catholic. As we welcome and congratulate these new members of our family of faith, we are reminded visibly and powerfully that the Easter mystery is not about a private relationship with the Lord, but necessarily involves a whole community. Sin isolates us, but grace draws us into solidarity with the Lord and one another. We are freed from the isolation of sin and know the freedom and joy of belonging to God's people.

In our culture today, when we speak about freedom, we often think about it in terms of my personal choice. But tonight we say something more: we recognize that we have all been chosen for membership in Christ's Risen Body, the Church. Secondly, we remember that our freedom is not just a freedom from various compulsions or worries, but it is truly a freedom that brings with it new responsibilities. We move away from a life dominated by selfish ambitions and fearful defenses to a life completely given for others, a life that is fully and truly Christian.

Tonight's Easter celebration represents the conclusion of the long journey of Lent; it is a moment of joyful triumph and glorious victory for all believers in Jesus Christ. It is a celebration of our oneness in Christ, a foreshadowing of the heavenly Passover when we will one day all be completely free of every earthly anxiety or burden. But Easter is not the end of the story; it launches us forward on a new journey of faith. We have spent forty days trying to understand the deepest desires of our hearts and our hunger for spiritual freedom. Tonight, we set forth—together—into a new way of living with the joy and confidence that we can worship God without fear.

And so, we will shortly be renewing our Baptismal promises, our pledge to reject the devil's temptation and to live according to the freedom of God's children. And then, we come to the Lord's Table to complete the Easter celebration by sharing in His Body and Blood, the spiritual nourishment for our new way of life in Christ, as Pope Benedict XVI has called it, the sign and sacrament of God's charity and the source by which we find the energy to love one another. This is the bread of our freedom, the new manna the Lord gives us as food for our journey of faith.

Born again of water and the Spirit, nourished by the Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus, together, with new freedom in our hearts, let us continue on our pilgrimage of faith to the home of our Heavenly Father.

As I began the homily with reference to the Canticle of Zachariah, I would like to close with the words of that beautiful prayer, words singularly appropriate for this day of Easter joy: *"Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel; He has come to His people and set them free. He has raised up for us a mighty savior...to set us from the hands of our enemies, free to worship Him without fear, holy and righteous in His sight all the days of our life... The dawn from on high shall break upon us and guide our feet into the way of peace."* Amen. Alleluia!