

A New Creation in Christ

There is something very ‘elemental’ about tonight’s celebration. The ancients believed that God created all things out of four basic elements: earth, air, fire and water. Tonight, all these elements play a role, as we might expect since we celebrate the new creation that comes about in Christ, and about us human beings being made new in him, coming to new life in him after **the** dying to self that is, or should be, the discipline of Lent.

We are human, that means ‘of the earth’. Lent begins with us being reminded of our mortality: ‘remember man that thou art dust and unto to dust thou shalt return’. At these words the dust and ashes of burnt palms is put upon our foreheads to bring home the point, and we are reminded that, in the Genesis account of creation, God fashioned mankind out of the dust of the earth. We are of the earth. But we are of the air also, not only in the literal sense that we have to breathe air in order to exist at all, but also because God has breathed his Spirit into us and given us his life so that we are made in his image and likeness. Our first reading tonight recalls us to this truth.

Fire is both light and heat. The discovery of fire and how to make it transformed human existence. It gave us warmth against the cold of winter and protection from wild beasts that would kill us for their food. It gave us a means of preparing our own food. It provided a means of light to drive away the darkness of night and the fears that lurk within it. But fire is destructive too, consuming everything in its path. Occasionally we hear of enormous forest fires in various parts of the world bringing terrible devastation in their wake, leaving nothing alive. But experts also tell us that such fires are necessary to cleanse and bring new life and that it is only possible for some plants to germinate once their seeds have been scorched and seared by forest fire. And, sure enough, in a few months, the forest floor is green

again, flourishing, bursting, burgeoning with fresh new life nourished by the ashes of the old.

Fire figures powerfully in tonight's ceremonies in all this real and symbolic imagery. Traditionally on the evening of the Wednesday of Holy Week monks in former times sang the office of Tenebrae, as we did here this week. Tenebrae means 'darkness' in Latin and during this celebration, every lamp in the Church is extinguished one by one until the church is in total darkness. On the eve of the great Triduum this is both a symbol of the mourning of believers for the sufferings of Christ and of the fact that he, the Light of the world, is to be snuffed out in the events of the days to follow, leaving our world cold, dark and lifeless. In his death, the world has lost its true light. But this light is restored through his coming back to life again in the resurrection.

The kindling of the new fire, which begins tonight's awesome ceremonies, symbolises Jesus coming back to life as the Light of the world. As we stand around the new fire, the warmth of Christ creeps over us and intensifies, dispelling the chill of our loss and warming us to the core with his new life flowing into us, our faces radiant again with the glow of his presence in us. The candles in the church, extinguished on Wednesday, are now lit again from the new fire and the light of Christ rising from the dead spreads, grows and fills every corner driving out darkness and fear. The words of St John come true before our eyes:

*All that came to be had life in him
And that life was the light of men,
A light that shines in the darkness,
A light that darkness could not overpower. (John 1:4-5)*

The world, without Christ, is a cold, dark, empty wilderness. The new fire symbolises Christ coming back to life to flood us with the warmth of God's love and call us out of the darkness of sin and ignorance into his most wonderful light of goodness, truth, beauty, unity and wholeness, justice and peace, joy and fulfilment.

Water is the symbol par excellence of life. The baptismal liturgy, which we celebrate in a moment, engages the element of water as life-giving, and the immersion of the paschal candle, symbolising the risen Christ, into the font transforms and consecrates this most basic element into the water of baptism, becoming the life-giving medium by which Jesus' Spirit and life is poured into the hearts of believers.

Earth, air, fire and water, the four elements which, by tradition, make up everything created, are thus transformed by the celebration of this most holy vigil and consecrated as God's servants bringing the life of Christ to all creation. We, and all things, are made a new creation in Christ through these most holy ceremonies. Creation itself is crying out, says St Paul, groaning to be set free from its slavery to sin and corruption. Sin and redemption are cosmic realities affecting the whole of God's creation. Tonight's ceremonies once more remind us that Jesus' resurrection redeems the whole universe from its slavery to corruption and that in him there is a new heaven and a new earth. He is truly the Light of the world.

He is the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end of all things. *'All time belongs to him and all the ages. To him be glory and power through every age and forever. Amen'*