

Easter Sunday / March 27, 2016

The Lure of Truth, Beauty and Goodness

Readings: Acts 10:34, 37-43; 1 Cor. 5: 6-8; Luke 24:1-12

Cathedral of Saint Paul

A major lure for me as a child in attending Masses during Holy Week was the wonderful variety of liturgies, each so different from the one the day before and especially at the Easter Vigil. After all, I got to hold a candle; it was all mine, and no one else's. If I dripped hot wax on my fingers, it was my fault. At a relatively early age, I was hooked.

It's impossible to miss the presence of our new Easter Candle, the central liturgical symbol of Easter. It was blessed and praised at last night's Easter Vigil with these words: "*O holy Father, accept this candle, a solemn offering, the work of bees and of your servants' hands, an evening sacrifice of praise, this gift from your most holy Church.*" Though the candle's exact origins are unclear, and while it may strike you as odd that we in the Church solemnly proclaim a hymn in honor of a 5 ft. pillar of beeswax, in fact this has been happening ever since the 4th century- and for very good reason.

The text extols the marvelous skill of the bees that produce honey and wax from flowers. The praise of the Bees is quite lengthy in the medieval version of the *Exultet*, and illuminated manuscripts include fascinating images of beekeeping in the Middle Ages. Even the communal nature of the bees living together in the hive lent itself to an observation of orderliness, tranquility and cooperation within the hive.

More than any other, St. Ambrose saw in the bee a symbol of purity, and while he may have been mistaken in his science regarding how the insects reproduce, still the purity of the beeswax was then and remains today far superior to any other type of candle produced. To this day, Easter candles are required to contain at least 51% beeswax. The virtues of the bees serve as a precursor, a foreshadowing- pointing seamlessly to the marvelous Virgin Birth of Christ, mentioned later in the hymn.

Speaking of the Candle several years ago, Pope Benedict XVI noted:

It reminds us that this object, the candle, has its origin in the work of bees. So the whole of creation plays its part. In the candle, creation becomes a bearer of light. But in the mind of the Fathers, the candle also in some sense contains a silent reference to the Church. The cooperation of the living community of believers in the Church in some way resembles the activity of bees. It builds up the community of light.

When this cathedral celebrated its very first Easter 101 years ago, it was lit by one single 650-watt bulb, and I suspect, a whole bunch of candles! Today, our main chandelier alone boasts of 100 bulbs, and none of us ever feels caught in the dark- we just pull out our cell phones in a pinch.

But before the advent of electricity, the light produced from the candles was an indispensable element of daily living. The significance of Easter cannot be fully appreciated without the themes of darkness being overcome by light, new life springing forth from death, and triumph emerging from apparent defeat and despair. The candle itself is burned as an “offering to God,” it welcomes new members in Baptism and stands tall to accompany those who have died during their funeral Masses.

In the early Church, a custom existed in which the candle was broken up into small pieces after the Easter Vigil, and all those in attendance took a fragment home with them. I regret to inform you that we do not observe that custom here-but you are invited to take a bulletin home with you! Since 1000 A.D., the Easter candle has been kept in the sanctuary until Pentecost, and we will maintain that custom!

Finally, the five grains of incense fixed in the Paschal Candle in the form of a Cross mark this ‘pillar of victory’ with the very sign of the gruesome instrument of death’s hollow threat.

The grains represent the five wounds of Jesus and the perfumes that Mary Magdalene and her companions had prepared for embalming Jesus' body in the tomb. We are called through our Baptism to carry that new light into the world.

Last night, we welcomed seven people to the Church through the saving waters of Baptism and sealed an additional twelve with the gift of the Holy Spirit in Confirmation. All nineteen partook of the Eucharistic banquet of the Lamb for the first time.

Each has experienced firsthand the powerful draw of truth (found in the teachings of the Faith), beauty (through sacred art, architecture and music here at the Cathedral) and goodness, by means of the loving example of their sponsors and others here in this parish.

We gather this day to proclaim unequivocally that the light of Christ, symbolized by the Easter candle, has scattered the darkness of the world. Jesus' resurrection is a transition into God's eternity and a fulfillment of all that remained hopelessly unfulfilled on earth. The word for this day is none other than *hope*. It is a hope that must be our fundamental reason for living, and a joy that must extinguish and transform the despair in our world with the light of Christ's glory.

We must not remain sitting here—we like St. Peter and the beloved disciple, must go into the Galilee of our time—our families, our cities, our nation—and lovingly yet courageously proclaim that the emptiness of the tomb has brought about the fullness of life in us. He has been raised; he is not here. Let us go forth to proclaim the Good News.