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—Guerric DeBona, OSB

“The scriptural readings of the Paschal Vigil are vital to understanding the significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus and how we have communion in these through Baptism. Indeed, these readings are fundamental to understanding the whole arc of the biblical proclamation of our salvation. This *Companion* is a great help for entering more deeply into these inspiring texts and letting their power shape our lives in Christ.”

—Abbot Jeremy Driscoll, OSB, Mount Angel Abbey,  
and author of *Awesome Glory: Resurrection in Scripture,  
Liturgy, and Theology*



# The Glenstal Companion to the Readings of the Easter Vigil

Edited by

Luke Macnamara, OSB, and Martin Browne, OSB



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1            2            3            4            5            6            7            8            9

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# Contents

Contributors vii

Preface ix

“Now That We Have Begun Our Solemn Vigil . . .” xi  
*An Introduction to the Easter Vigil in the Holy Night*  
Brendan Coffey, OSB

## The Readings of the Vigil

- Chapter One* What Is the Beginning of Everything? 1  
*First Reading • Genesis 1:1–2:2*  
Terence Crotty, OP
- Chapter Two* A Costly Sacrifice 15  
*Second Reading • Genesis 22:1–18*  
Luke Macnamara, OSB
- Chapter Three* Crossing the Red Sea 29  
*Third Reading • Exodus 14:15–15:1*  
Francis Cousins

- Chapter Four* Discovering God in the Desert 45  
*Fourth Reading • Isaiah 54:5-14*  
Jessie Rogers
- Chapter Five* The Fountain and the Banquet 59  
*Fifth Reading • Isaiah 55:1-11*  
Columba McCann, OSB
- Chapter Six* Return to the Fountain of Wisdom 73  
*Sixth Reading • Baruch 3:9-15, 32-4:4*  
Susan Docherty
- Chapter Seven* Water, Heart and Spirit 87  
*Seventh Reading • Ezekiel 36:16-28*  
Martin Browne, OSB
- Chapter Eight* Baptized into Christ Jesus—Alive for God 101  
*Eighth Reading • Romans 6:3-11*  
Mary T. O'Brien, PBVM
- Chapter Nine* Dawning 113  
*Gospel, Year A • Matthew 28:1-10*  
Céline Mangan, OP
- Chapter Ten* The Open Tomb and the Well-Spring  
of Life 123  
*Gospel, Year B • Mark 16:1-7*  
Luke Macnamara, OSB
- Chapter Eleven* Witnesses of the Resurrection 135  
*Gospel, Year C • Luke 24:1-12*  
Thomas Esposito, OCist

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## Preface

From earliest times, the Church has celebrated Easter, the feast of feasts, by means of a night vigil. The Easter Vigil is rightly known as the “mother of all holy vigils.” As the Church’s instruction on the celebration of Easter puts it: “The Resurrection of Christ is the foundation of our faith and hope, and through Baptism and Confirmation, we are inserted into the Paschal Mystery of Christ, dying, buried, and raised with him, and with him, we shall also reign. The full meaning of Vigil is a waiting for the coming of the Lord.”

The expectant waiting of the Easter Vigil is expressed in an extended Liturgy of the Word, as the assembly basks in the light of the Paschal Candle. However, the Vigil’s series of Old Testament readings is abbreviated in many worshipping communities, often extremely so. If the Vigil also happens to be scheduled for early in the evening, before the sun has set, there is little outward difference between the Easter Vigil and any other Saturday evening Mass. This is far from what is envisaged by the liturgy itself. The very nature of a vigil implies that it be a somewhat prolonged celebration.

One of the reasons why some communities might omit one or more readings is that they can sometimes seem inaccessible or irrelevant to the feast being celebrated. Some of them may seem cruel or even barbaric. Even when most or all of the readings are proclaimed during the Vigil, it is not easy to draw from them all

in the homily; and so the reason for their inclusion may not be clear. Yet the Easter Vigil readings were all chosen because of the light they shed on the central reality of the Christian faith—the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ. Spending some time and effort on deepening our encounter with God’s Word in these texts will surely enrich our celebration of the Vigil.

This collection has its origins in a series of Sunday afternoon talks in Glenstal Abbey during Lent 2018. There are more readings in the Easter Vigil than Sundays in Lent, and so the idea was born of inviting further contributions and producing a collection that covers the seven Old Testament readings, the Epistle, and the Gospel readings for Years A, B, and C. Some of the contributors are academic Scripture scholars, while others have liturgical or more general theological interests. This means that each chapter has a distinctive approach and style. Each contributor was asked to examine a single Vigil reading, in its liturgical context, so as to provide real and substantial information and nourishment in an attractive and accessible way.

As the title states, this book is intended to be a companion to the Easter Vigil. It can never take the place of the experience of actually hearing the readings proclaimed in the liturgical assembly. But it can help to enrich that experience. Whether it is used for private reflection and prayer by an individual, as an aid to preparation by a reader or preacher, or in Scripture or liturgy groups, the aim of the book is simply to enable readers to enter more deeply into the readings of the Easter Vigil. Our hope is that it will be a rich resource, year after year, for any Christian who wishes to read, study and pray with the full selection of Scripture provided by the Church for this “truly blessed night, when things of heaven are wed to those of earth.”

Luke Macnamara, OSB  
Martin Browne, OSB  
Glenstal Abbey

# “Now That We Have Begun Our Solemn Vigil . . .”

*An Introduction to the Easter Vigil in the Holy Night*

BRENDAN COFFEY, OSB

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## *Background*

The Easter Vigil did not come into existence on February 9, 1951, when Pope Pius XII allowed its celebration *ad experimentum* during the night for the first time in many centuries.<sup>1</sup> The Easter Vigil is, in fact, the oldest of the Triduum ceremonies, being celebrated from the early centuries. Most scholars today believe that the original practice was to have only one great celebration at Easter which encompassed the Passion, death and Resurrection of the Lord.<sup>2</sup> This was later to become three separate liturgies: the Mass of the Lord's Supper; the Passion of the Lord; and the Easter Vigil. The Easter Vigil occupied the entire night of Holy Saturday in the third and fourth centuries. At this period in history no further liturgy was celebrated on Easter Day. The earliest

1. Adolf Adam, *The Liturgical Year: Its History and Its Meaning after the Reform of the Liturgy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 64.

2. *Ibid.*, 63.

surviving copy of the Easter Vigil liturgy is an Armenian Easter Vigil in Jerusalem that dates from the fifth century.<sup>3</sup> Once we get to the sixth century the Vigil had already been shortened and was ending before midnight, so a separate Mass had appeared for Easter Sunday. By the eighth century it was permissible, though not obligatory, to begin the Vigil once the first star had appeared in the night sky. When we move on to the ninth century we find things had slipped further, and it was permitted to begin the Vigil after the office of None (about 3:00 pm).<sup>4</sup>

Skipping on several more centuries, we find that by the fourteenth century church law allowed None to be prayed in the morning hours if desired, and so the Vigil could also be celebrated on the morning of Holy Saturday. The Missal of Pius V, the Missal of Trent (1570), made this arrangement not only possible but obligatory, and so it was no longer permitted to have the Easter Vigil in the afternoon or evening.

So we had an incongruous situation where the Easter Candle was being lit and the *Lumen Christi* sung while the sun was shining brightly into the church, the Resurrection was proclaimed and yet the people knew full well that their Triduum fast did not end until after noon on Holy Saturday as this was the day in which Christ lay in the tomb.

This was obviously a most bizarre situation and anyone who knew anything at all about the history of the liturgy could easily see that this made no sense whatsoever. The experiment of Pius XII in 1951 became the norm in 1955, and the Church has celebrated the Easter Vigil after dark on Holy Saturday evening since that time. In 1955, the Holy See offered the following reasons for its radical reform of the Easter Vigil and Holy Week ceremonies:

3. Charles Renoux, ed., *Le lectionnaire de Jérusalem en Arménie* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1989).

4. Adam, *The Liturgical Year*, 76.

In the middle ages various causes conspired to bring them forward earlier and earlier into the day, so that eventually they became morning functions, impairing the earlier harmony with the accounts given in the Gospel narratives. This disharmony was most glaring on the Saturday, which became liturgically the day of Resurrection instead of that day's eve, and, liturgically again, from a day of darkest mourning became a day of light and gladness.<sup>5</sup>

The 1951 reintroduction of the Vigil was important for another reason. It was the first liturgy in hundreds of years to assign an active role to the faithful. The structure of the Vigil has changed remarkably little from early times, but obviously, as with everything else, there have been some changes and a certain amount of evolution. So let's begin by having a look at some of these changes and the reasons for them.

### *Structure*

There are four parts to the Easter Vigil: the Liturgy of Light; the Liturgy of the Word; the Liturgy of Baptism; and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Oddly enough, it is the Liturgy of Light that has seen most change and development.

The old Roman liturgy didn't have a blessing for the Easter Fire. This blessing is of Frankish origin, and it was intended to displace the spring fires lit by pagans in honor of Wotan, or Odin as he is sometimes called, the king of the gods.<sup>6</sup> The Romans did have a fire; in fact they had several fires. In the eighth century the Romans lit many fires around the city on Holy Thursday after the chrism was consecrated, and these were kept going until Holy

5. *Ibid.*, 77.

6. *Ibid.*, 76.

Saturday night and were used to light the candles of the faithful for the Vigil. The commission for the revision of the Easter Vigil after Vatican II actually contemplated getting rid of the fire altogether but decided against it because it was much loved by the people.

The Easter Candle originated with the widespread custom in Rome and elsewhere of lighting up Easter night with candles, symbolizing Christ who has been raised from the night of death. Originally, according to Adolf Adam in his study of the liturgical year, there appear to have been two Easter candles, each about the size of a person, but this was relatively quickly reduced to one and the Gallic liturgy then added a special blessing and the further symbols of the Cross, alpha and omega, and the date.<sup>7</sup> The *Exsultet* is also of Gallic origin and dates probably from the seventh century. It first appears in the *Missale Gothicum* of the seventh century and in the *Bobbio Missal* of the late seventh century and so there is an interesting Irish connection there.

In the Christian East there is no direct parallel with the Paschal Candle but the priest or presiding bishop does carry a *paschal trikirion* or triple candle in his hand. The people carry candles just as we do. So the people's lighted candles came first and the Paschal Candle later. Not what one might expect perhaps? In the Ambrosian Rite there is a Paschal Candle but it doesn't carry the engravings of Cross, date, etc. It is a large plain candle, remaining faithful to the older tradition. In the Middle Ages, the Paschal Candle of Salisbury Cathedral was said to have been 36 feet tall. That is not as unusual as it may seem, because by the Middle Ages the Paschal Candle had become so large it was no longer carried in procession and small candles arranged in a triangle had replaced it for the purposes of the procession.<sup>8</sup>

7. *Ibid.*, 78.

8. Kenneth W. Stevenson, *Worship: Wonderful and Sacred Mystery* (Washington, DC: Pastoral Press, 1992), 199.

The five grains of incense that are inserted into the candle with pins in memory of the five wounds of Christ possibly derive from a medieval misunderstanding.<sup>9</sup> In the Gelasian Sacramentary (the sacramentary of the parish liturgy of Rome), there was a prayer called *Benedictio super incensum*, which means “Blessing on the lighted candle” but was possibly misunderstood to mean “Blessing on the incense,” and so grains of incense were placed into the candle—a rather peculiar action. Over time, meaning is attached to liturgical action, and so here the incense came to represent the five wounds of Christ and the candle bears the wounds as does the body of the risen Lord.

Moving to the Liturgy of the Word, this is what makes the Vigil a vigil. Paul Turner in his 2011 study of Holy Week notes in relation to the Vigil that “the length of the service is one of its primary symbols.”<sup>10</sup> From the earliest of times the long vigil in the night was punctuated by readings, hymns, psalms, and prayers. The only thing that has changed here is the number and choice of readings. The present selection of readings has been painstakingly put together to reflect the mystery of salvation which we celebrate. The *Gloria* now marks the transition from the Old to New Testaments. In the past it has been in different locations, including at the end of the rite of Baptism as a postbaptismal hymn of praise.<sup>11</sup> The Alleluia returns with great solemnity before the Gospel, after being absent for the duration of Lent.

Baptism and the celebration of the sacraments of initiation on this holy night are likewise attested to from earliest times in both the East and the West; even Egeria of the late fourth

9. Paul Turner, *Glory in the Cross: Holy Week the Third Edition of the Roman Missal* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 122.

10. Turner, *Glory in the Cross*, 131.

11. *Ibid.*, 141.

century mentions them.<sup>12</sup> There are no shortage of homilies from those early centuries about Baptism and the Easter Mystery. The Church has always looked upon the fire and flame as symbolizing Christ's victory over death and water and the font as the sign of our participation in that victory. We will return to the symbolic aspects of this later. The prayer for the blessing of the water imitates the structure of the Eucharistic Prayer. It has an *anamnesis* (remembering), recalling the institution of Baptism, and an *epiclesis*, invoking of the Holy Spirit on the waters. This structure is more obvious in the prayer of blessing used if there are candidates for Baptism. If someone is to be baptized, the Paschal Candle is dipped into the waters of the font as part of the blessing. This practice goes back, once again, to the Gelasian Sacramentary and the eighth century. We then renew our baptismal promises and are sprinkled with the Easter water.<sup>13</sup>

The Vigil climaxes in a joyous celebration of the Eucharist. The risen Lord invites all to participate in the new life he brings by sharing the feast that he has prepared. We thus look forward to the great messianic feast of the kingdom of God when the redeemed from every time and place "will come from the east and the west and from the north and the south and will recline at table in the kingdom of God" (Luke 13:29). The Vigil thus celebrates what God has done, is doing, and will do.

### *When?*

The structure of the Easter Vigil may be familiar to many, but what does it all mean? Why do we continue with this celebration and the use of these symbols? And what do they have to say to us

12. *Ibid.*, 145.

13. *Ibid.*, 150.

today? What follows are some reflections on the main symbols of the Easter Vigil.

Firstly, I think it is very important to realize that nature herself is proclaiming the Resurrection all around us at Easter. The celebration of Easter has long been linked to the spring equinox. This is a moment of perfect balance between light and darkness and this is our first great symbol in the Easter Vigil—light and darkness.

The Council of Nicaea (325 CE) set the date of Easter as the Sunday following the paschal full moon, which is the full moon that falls on or after the vernal (spring) equinox. An equinox occurs twice a year when the tilt of the Earth's axis is inclined neither away from nor toward the sun, the center of the sun being in the same plane as the earth's equator—a day of perfect balance.

We know that Easter must always occur on a Sunday, because Sunday was the day of Christ's Resurrection. But what is the significance of the paschal full moon? Put simply, that was how the date of Passover was calculated in the Jewish calendar and the Last Supper occurred on or near the Passover. Therefore, Easter was the Sunday after Passover.

It would be easy to think that this is a very complicated way of doing something very simple. Why go to all of that trouble? Why not just fix a date and end all this confusion? It would mean that planning the year would be so much easier as everything could be standardized. For a Christian there are other considerations because Easter follows the full moon for its symbolic value; the symbolism of light and darkness, the foundational symbol on which the Easter Vigil is built.

What we do in our Easter Vigil reflects almost exactly what the world of nature is doing around us. Today with all our electric and artificial lighting we have lost touch with some things in the natural world. We no longer experience the wonder of the full moon on a clear night where the sun shines from morning till

evening and then the full moon shines from evening till morning. It is a day without night. Much as Christmas is tied to the winter solstice—the moment in the year when the light begins to conquer the darkness—Easter is tied to the full moon of the spring equinox, the day without night. The fire and candles of the Easter Vigil take up this theme, which is already present in nature itself, and they turn the darkness of night into endless day. Just as Good Friday became a day of darkness when the sun disappeared from the sky, Easter Sunday is a day without night, filled with the light of the Risen One.

### *Light and Fire*

As we move into the Liturgy of the Word this same great symbol of light and darkness returns as the very first reading we hear is the story of creation. In the beginning there was darkness over the deep and God's Spirit hovered over the water. We start at the beginning because God was before the beginning. When God spoke, there was light. The Word of God brings light into the darkness of the deep. It brings light into the darkness of the world, and it brings light into the darkness of my own life. The Word is Christ, and Christ himself brings light. The spoken word is a powerful tool. It can bring light into the deep darkness of another human being if the word I speak is from Christ. It can also bring great harm if my spoken word comes from my own darkness, my jealousy, my insecurity or my selfishness. If the Word of God is alive within me then that is what people will hear from me when I speak. In the beginning is freedom. Hence it is good to be a human person.

God is busy in this story of creation. He goes on to create heaven and earth, he divides the waters from the dry land, creates the vegetation and plants. He places lights in the heavens and divides night from day. He creates the fish of the sea, the

birds of the air and the animals on the earth. He saw that all of this was good.

Then God reaches the climax of his creation, man and woman. We are God’s work of art, and if only we could believe this we would have restored the lost paradise of the Garden of Eden. It can be so easy for a Christian to believe in the sanctity of human life in a general sense and so difficult to believe that the people I have to live with are actually temples of the Holy Spirit and that in my daily dealings with them I worship the Lord and Master of my life. All of this and much, much more is contained in our first symbol.

Closely related to the symbol of light is the instrument of that light—fire. Fire is absolutely fascinating. You can sit and watch a fire for ages, with its different warm colors, its glow, its heat, and the way it dances. It is truly captivating. Fire is also powerful, and we respect it. You do not put your hand into the fire if you know what’s good for you. Fire has the power to consume everything. It isn’t difficult to understand why almost every religion that has ever been uses fire as a symbol for God.

Fire is almost unique in its properties. It can be divided as many times as you wish and still loses nothing of its original brightness. This is exactly what we do in our Vigil. The fire is taken from the blessed Easter fire and lights the Paschal Candle. The fire from the Paschal Candle in turn lights our individual candles. Each flame burns brightly and the flame of the Paschal Candle does not diminish. It is hard to think of a more appropriate symbol for the Resurrection.

After the *lucernarium*, the liturgy of light, and the singing of the *Exsultet*, we begin the Liturgy of the Word. In listening to these readings of the Vigil we hear not only the story of the relationship between God and humanity but also the story of our own individual relationships with God and our relationships with one another.

Before the liturgical reform of Vatican II there were twelve Old Testament readings and two from the New Testament. The New Testament readings have been retained. The number of Old Testament readings has been fixed at seven, of which we must choose at least three. The Church wishes to offer us an overview of salvation history, starting with creation, passing through God's choice of Israel to be his very own people, their subsequent liberation from slavery in Egypt and the testimony of the prophets down the ages. Liturgical tradition looks upon all of these readings as prophecies. Suffice it to say that on this night the Church in the Liturgy of the Word says who she is. We say who we are as a people and that takes some time. We do this by telling our story, the story of our dealings with God and his dealings with us.

What we are grappling with is the mystery of God, the *mysterium tremendum*, as it is called. We have great difficulty understanding God, finding words to describe God, and that is why symbols are so important in the Vigil.

### *Water and Womb*

The liturgical celebration of the Easter Vigil makes use of many symbols, but it sets before us two great symbols. First, there is the fire that becomes light, examined above, and, secondly, there is the great symbol of water. This water recalls the waters of the Red Sea, the mystery of the Cross. Here, on this holy night, it is presented to us as life-giving spring water, living water. It becomes the image of the sacrament of Baptism in which we become sharers in the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Just as with the symbol of light and darkness so too with the symbol of water, the Liturgy of the Word takes up the theme.

The reading from the book of Exodus is appropriate for this holy night—the story of the crossing of the Red Sea. We have the people of Israel fleeing for their lives with the Egyptians in

hot pursuit. The waters part to left and to right and the people of Israel go safely through these waters. The Egyptians, however, are not so lucky. What happens is an obvious metaphor for Baptism. In these waters I am given the opportunity to free myself from all my demons, the Egyptians of the story, who lurk in the shadows and dog my heels. The waters of the Red Sea and the living waters of Baptism allow me to share in the Resurrection.

The Church has long regarded the font of Baptism and its waters as her womb. The font holds the waters of life, the waters of new birth. The inscription in the baptistery of St. John Lateran, the Cathedral Church of the city of Rome and one of the oldest sites of Christian worship, says: “At this font, the Church, our mother, gives birth from her virginal womb to the children she conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit.” The baptismal font, in the language of the early Church, is the Divine Womb whence we receive second birth as children of God.

### *The Lord’s Day*

What do these symbols have to say to us in our Christian lives? Easter has turned our daily lives upside-down. We recall that the Sabbath is the seventh day of the week, the end of the week. After six days in which we in some sense participate in God’s work of creation, the Sabbath is the day of rest. It is also the day Christ lay buried in the tomb, his day of rest. But something quite unexpected happened among the early Christians: the place of the Sabbath, Saturday, the seventh day, was taken by the first day, Sunday, the beginning of the week.

As the day of the liturgical assembly, Sunday is the day for encounter with God through Jesus Christ. This is a new structure for the week. Something very significant has happened here and time has been disrupted. Our week sets out from the first day as the day of encounter with the Risen Lord. This encounter

happens afresh at every celebration of the Eucharist, when the Lord enters anew into the midst of his disciples and gives himself to them, allows himself, so to speak, to be touched by them as he was by Thomas, and sits down at table with them as with the disciples on the road to Emmaus. This change is utterly extraordinary, considering that the Sabbath is so profoundly rooted in the Old Testament.

The first day, according to the Genesis account, is the day on which creation begins. Now it is the day of creation in a new way, it has become the day of the new creation. Jesus is risen and dies no more. Tertullian, a Christian writer of the third century writing on the subject of Christ's Resurrection and our resurrection says: "Rest assured, flesh and blood, through Christ you have gained your place in heaven and in the Kingdom of God."<sup>14</sup> Easter Day ushers in a new creation. That is precisely why the Church starts the liturgy on this day with the old creation, so that we can learn to understand the new one correctly and in the light of the old.

What does this mean? It means that life is stronger than death. Good is stronger than evil. Love is stronger than hate. Truth is stronger than lies. To quote Pope Benedict XVI:

The darkness of the previous days is driven away the moment Jesus rises from the grave and himself becomes God's pure light. But this applies not only to him, not only to the darkness of those days. With the Resurrection of Jesus, light itself is created anew. He draws all of us after him into the new light of the Resurrection and he conquers all darkness. He is God's new day.<sup>15</sup>

14. Patrick J. Fletcher, *Resurrection Realism: Ratzinger the Augustinian* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 231.

15. Easter homily of Pope Benedict XVI, April 7, 2012.

The symbols of the Vigil allow us to explore these mysteries in our own lives.

On Easter night, the night of the new creation, the Church presents the mystery of light using the Paschal Candle. This is a light that lives by giving of itself. The candle shines inasmuch as it is burnt up. It gives light, inasmuch as it gives itself. The liturgy tells us here that in the paschal mystery it is Christ who gives himself to bestow the great light. Here too the mystery of Christ is made visible. Christ, the light, is fire and flame, burning up evil and so reshaping both the world and ourselves.

Finally, the great hymn of the *Exsultet*, which the deacon sings at the beginning of the Easter liturgy, points us to another aspect of the candle. It reminds us that the candle has its origin in the work of bees. So the whole of creation plays its part. In the candle, creation itself becomes the bearer of the light. The bees are a living community and the living community of believers in the Church in some way resembles the activity of bees. We build up the community of light. So the candle serves as a summons to us to become involved in the community of the Church, whose purpose is to let the light of Christ shine upon the world.

In the pages of this book the readings of the Great Vigil are explored and revealed. We must always remember, however, that these readings exist in the context of this Vigil and also reveal and are themselves revealed in its celebration.



## CHAPTER ONE

# What Is the Beginning of Everything?

*First Reading • Genesis 1:1–2:2*

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### *Introduction*

In the book of Daniel the story is told of the three young men thrown into the fire by the evil king Nebuchadnezzar because of their fidelity to the God of Israel. The king looks into the furnace and sees four men not burning but walking around and praising God. The fourth young man, the king gasps, “looks like a son of God.” And they sing the song, “Bless the Lord, all you works of the Lord, / praise and exalt him above all forever,” and continue on through all creation: the angelic hosts, the sun and moon, showers and rain, snow and wind, all the way down to the human race and to Israel, all are called to bless the Lord.

This great canticle, recited each Sunday morning in the Church’s Liturgy of the Hours, is only one of many praises of God and his creation that are found in the Scriptures. Jesus himself, when teaching about the love of God the Father, points to the wonder of creation: “Learn from the way the wild flowers grow. They do not work or spin. But I tell you that not even Solomon in

all his splendor was clothed like one of them” (Matt 6:28-29). The wonder of creation is a stream bubbling through the sacred text.

The first chapter of Genesis, which we hear proclaimed at the Easter Vigil, is exactly the same—praise of God for the wonders of creation. It has often been reduced by readers and interpreters to a materialist, blow by blow, failed and outdated pseudo-scientific account of the origins of the universe. How unfortunate! It is not a historical account, but rather a polyvalent, multivoiced account of the glory of God as Creator. It speaks of a universe that is created, that is ordered, and that is good, which God creates effortlessly and with infinite and ineffable majesty.

This is more important to know than any attempt at dating. Were I left with a choice between the truth that this chapter teaches me and the truth that a book like *A Brief History of Time* teaches me, with all due respect, the truth I read in Genesis 1 is more essential to me—though the two are, of course, complementary.

That the universe is a mystery that in no sense explains itself—i.e., that it is created from without—is a given. Since the Enlightenment human beings have felt a pressing need to justify this. It is obvious that we run out of explanatory power quite quickly when observing the world. Not only that the world exists, but that it is not simply stones but has living things in it too; and not simply living things, but procreative living things that increase and multiply; and not simply living things, but thinking beings with discursive thought; and not simply that, but that the world is good and beautiful for these thinking beings to observe and to love. The English scientist John Polkinghorne writes about the success of science in modern times and reminds his readers that this success

has been purchased by the modesty of its explanatory ambition. It does not attempt to ask and answer every question that one might legitimately raise. Instead it confines

itself to investigating natural processes and attending to the question of how things happened. Other questions, such as those relating to meaning and purpose, are deliberately bracketed out.<sup>1</sup>

Christians don't feel the need to be modest in our explanatory ambitions or to bracket out questions of meaning, because the evidence is all around us: "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1-2).

### *In the Beginning, God Created . . . a Temple*

God creates from nothing. The Hebrew word used here for his work is *bara*, an uncommon word quite different from the word that will be used in chapter 2 for the work of a craftsman molding Adam from the dust, or the usual Hebrew word *asah*, "to make." Of course, when he creates, God is doing something unlike anything he will do again. He is making nothing to be something, calling into being out of nothingness. "A mighty wind swept over the waters" (1:2). The constructive force of creation is God himself, and the Spirit who creates is the Spirit who sanctifies—creation and sanctification occur in the one movement. In Exodus 31:3, the Spirit of God will reappear for the first time in the Bible, but this time for the furnishing of the Temple: "See, I have singled out Bezalel, son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with a divine spirit of skill and understanding and knowledge in every craft" (Exod 31:2-3). The craftsman creates, and the Spirit sanctifies in one movement.

1. John Polkinghorne, "The Universe as Creation," in *God and World: Theology of Creation from Scientific and Ecumenical Standpoints*, ed. Tomasz Trafny and Armand Puig i Tàrrach (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2011), 33.

Creation in Genesis 1 takes seven days, with God resting like an observant Jew on the seventh. One scholar has commented: “The seven days represent the liturgical week, the day beginning in the evening, and the week crowned by Sabbath. Sabbath was instituted at Sinai (Exod 20:8-11) though anticipated in observance at an earlier stage in the wilderness (Exod 16:22-30). That it also crowns the work of construction of the wilderness sanctuary (Exod 31:12-17) is one of several indications of parallelism between world-building and sanctuary-building. The point is being made that Sabbath is rooted in the created order of things.”<sup>2</sup>

Like the Temple as seen by the Prophet Ezekiel (chapter 40), the temple of creation is full of numbers. Seven times God sees and seven times we are told “And so it happened.” Seven times God creates; ten times “every kind/kinds” of species are specified. Five times God “names” things. Five times he separates. The author has it all planned out, and the order of his own writing reflects the perfect order that he sees in the divine work of creation.

The then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger is among many who have seen in this a link also to the Ten Commandments, the same God who creates gives the Law on Sinai—each in perfect order, each in perfect goodness, each in divine wisdom. The words “God said” appear ten times in the creation account. In this way the creation narrative anticipates the Ten Commandments. This makes us realize that these Ten Commandments are, as it were, an echo of the creation. They are not arbitrary inventions for the purpose of erecting barriers to human freedom but signs pointing to the spirit, the language, and the meaning of creation. They are a translation of the language of the universe, a translation of God’s logic, which constructed the universe.<sup>3</sup> And we might

2. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 61–63.

3. Joseph Ratzinger, *In the Beginning* (London: T & T Clark, 1995), 26.

add the converse. This means that creation is as religious as the commandments. It is oriented towards God. The Spirit hovering on the waters, the numerical ordering of the account, the almost symphonic repetition of evening and morning, and the affirmation of the goodness of what is created, the lights in the vault of heaven marking “fixed times, the days and the years,” and, finally and most obviously, the working week of six days that comes to rest in God, all point to a creation that is directed towards worship and rest in God. God himself rests (2:2), not because he is tired but like a god resting in his Temple.

In the chapters that mirror this at the end of the Bible, in Revelation, we read of “a new heaven and a new earth,” constructed exactly as a Temple, where God lives among his people, so that “He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will always be with them” (Rev 21:3). So, creation begins and will end as a Temple in which God dwells among his people. The many temples in the meantime are replacements for what should be and will be a universal phenomenon. As always, the key that turns this lock is Jesus himself. It is said of him after he promised to destroy “this temple and in three days . . . raise it up” that, “he was speaking about the temple of his body. Therefore, when he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they came to believe the scripture and the word Jesus had spoken” (John 2:19, 21-22).

### *Creation at Easter*

Writing towards the middle of the second century, Melito of Sardis described Christ as

the Passover of our salvation. This is the one who patiently endured many things in many people: This is the one who was murdered in Abel, and bound as a sacrifice in Isaac,

and exiled in Jacob, and sold in Joseph, and exposed in Moses, and sacrificed in the lamb, and hunted down in David, and dishonored in the prophets.<sup>4</sup>

What Bishop Melito is saying is that the story of the Old Testament is the story of Christ—an instinct present in Christians since the day of Pentecost. He is expounding here on the theme that he has first stated:

Therefore, understand this, O beloved: The mystery of the Passover is new and old, eternal and temporal, corruptible and incorruptible, mortal and immortal in this fashion. It is old insofar as it concerns the law, but new insofar as it concerns the Gospel; temporal insofar as it concerns the type, eternal because of grace. . . . The law is old, but the Gospel is new; the type was for a time, but grace is forever.<sup>5</sup>

So too, therefore, the opening lines of the book of Genesis are the story of Christ, about whom the Evangelist said, “All things came to be through him, / and without him nothing came to be” (John 1:3). God creates by a Word: “Let there be light,” he says, “and there was light.” And of that Word it will be said, “the Word became flesh / and made his dwelling among us, / . . . full of grace and truth,” as the man Jesus Christ (John 1:14). In the shining of light out of darkness in the act of creation, Jesus was the light.

And so Genesis 1 should be seen both in terms of the law and in terms of the Gospel, in terms of creation and in terms of Christ. It is for this reason that it is the first reading in the Easter Vigil, not because it speaks of an act of creation which is past, but because it speaks of a Word and a light and a beginning who are,

4. Melito of Sardis, *Peri Pascha*, 69. Online at <http://www.kerux.com/doc/0401A1.asp>.

5. *Peri Pascha*, 2–4.

each of them—Word, light, and beginning—the person of Jesus Christ, about whom the Easter Vigil turns. St. Athanasius writes:

As we proceed in our exposition of [the Incarnation of the Word], we must first speak about the creation of the universe and its creator, God, so that in this way we may consider as fitting that its renewal was effected by the Word who created it in the beginning.<sup>6</sup>

### *In What Beginning?*

The Hebrew word *rēshīt*, “beginning,” is related to the word *rōsh*,<sup>7</sup> meaning “head,” so that head and beginning are related. They are related in English too when we speak of the head of a river or the heading of a page. Saint Paul, writing in his Letter to the Colossians, speaks of Christ as, “the head of the body, the church. / He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, / that in all things he himself might be preeminent” (Col 1:18). Paul therefore throws a rope between Genesis 1 and the Resurrection of Christ. “He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead.” And so the presence of this reading in the Easter Vigil liturgy begins to make perfect sense.

We should not forget the earlier lines of this hymn of Christ in the opening chapter of Colossians, with its own echoes of the light and darkness of the creation story, “giving thanks to the Father, who has made you fit to share in the inheritance of the holy ones in light. He delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have

6. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 1 (ACCS 1: xlviii).

7. Having an uncanny similarity to the Irish word *ros*, meaning a “headland.” See Niall Ó Dónaill, ed., *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla* (Dublin: Oifig an tSoláthair, 1977), 1011.

redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:12-14). Russell Reno comments:

Paul evokes the division of light and darkness on the first day of creation, . . . [T]he Father pries the faithful out of the dominion of darkness and delivers them to their inheritance of light (Col 1:12-13). Paul is not simply providing a symbolic, poetic use of the images of light and darkness. This passage from Colossians functions as an interpretation of Genesis 1. In Christ, Paul writes, “all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him” (1:16). The crucified Christ is “the mystery hidden for ages and generations” (1:26). Therefore, once the truth of Christ is made manifest, all things—especially the source and origin and purpose of all things—become clear.<sup>8</sup>

There is within the “beginning” mentioned in the opening words of the Bible another beginning, more primordial than the beginning of the world. Because St. John the Evangelist, famously re-using this passage, tells us that “in the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1), the Fathers of the Church saw a trinitarian stamp on this passage in Genesis—God the Father as Creator, the Spirit hovering over the face of the waters, and the Beginning, who is Christ. When Jesus is asked about his identity, he responds, as we read in the Gospel according to John: “The beginning, who also speak unto you” (John 8:25, Douay-Rheims).

When he reads this verse, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,” the second-century Father of the

8. Russell Reno, “Beginning with the Ending,” in *Genesis and Christian Theology*, ed. Nathan MacDonald, Mark W. Elliott, and Grant Macaskill (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 27.

Church, Origen, writes: “Scripture is not speaking here of any temporal beginning, but it says that the heavens and the earth and all things that were made were made ‘in the beginning,’ that is, in the Savior.”<sup>9</sup>

When proclaimed during the Easter Vigil, this reading speaks precisely of the ultimate new creation where, out of the nothingness and the formless void of death, Christ rises. There is a beginning. Something new has been made, in which the one action of God, Father, Son, and Spirit, has created what was never seen before. That first Easter morning saw the dawn of a new hope for humanity: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in his great mercy gave us a new birth to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable” (1 Pet 1:3-4).

The medieval Jewish commentator Rashi (1040–1105) begins his commentary on Genesis not by commenting on the phrase, “In the beginning,” as we would have expected. Rather, he goes directly to Exodus 12: “This month will stand at the head of your calendar; you will reckon it the first month of the year” (Exod 12:2). He comments, referring to the first five books of the Bible, “the books of the Law of Israel should have commenced with the verse ‘This month shall be for you the beginning of months’ which is the first commandment given to Israel. What is the reason, then, that it commences with the account of the Creation?”

And he goes on to answer by saying that “this verse calls aloud for explanation in the manner that our rabbis explained it: God created the world for the sake of the Torah which is called ‘The beginning of [God’s] increase’” (referring to Proverbs 8:22).<sup>10</sup>

9. Origen, *Homilies on Genesis*, 1.1. (ACCS 1:1).

10. Rashi, in *Chumash with Rashi’s Commentary*, ed. A.M. Silbermann (Jerusalem: Silbermann Family, 1934), 2.

This interpretation is dependent, of course, on who is being referred to in this verse of Proverbs. For Rashi it is the Law; for Christians it is certainly Christ. Nevertheless, the point stands. Reno comments:

The solution rests in specifying the proper sense of “beginning” . . . God is saying, in effect, “the months and the lunar calendar exist for the sake of marking the time of the Passover.” More bluntly, God is saying to the Israelites as they prepare to depart from Egypt: “I made time and history for the sake of *this* moment, for the sake of *this* sacrifice.”<sup>11</sup>

We can transfer this insight to the place of this reading within the Easter Vigil: God says to us, “I made time and history for the sake of *this* moment, for the sake of *this* event: the Resurrection of Christ.” As the *Exsultet* will proclaim of our own coming into being:

Our birth would have been no gain, had we not been redeemed. . . .

O truly necessary sin of Adam, destroyed completely by the Death of Christ!

O happy fault that earned so great, so glorious a Redeemer!

O truly blessed night, worthy alone to know the time and hour when Christ rose from the underworld!

### *Light without a Need for the Sun*

On the first day, God created light and this light creates the morning. We should note how strange this is because there is no sun, moon, or stars until the fourth day. The authors were no

11. Reno, “Beginning,” 35–36.

fools and, living in a Mediterranean country, they knew that the sun was responsible for light and that in the absence of the sun light diminished or disappeared. This is seen as well in the creation of plant-life on the third day, one day before the creation of the sun. Saint Basil the Great wrote, “the adornment of the earth [by plants] is older than the sun, that those who have been misled may cease worshipping the sun as the origin of life.”<sup>12</sup>

Even the mention of evening and morning is somewhat perplexing. Evening and morning are caused by the relative movement of the earth and the sun, so without a sun, how can evening and morning be? In his own recycling of the Genesis story to speak of Christ, St. John the Evangelist, in the Prologue to his Gospel, says of the Word that, “through him was life, / and this life was the light of the human race; / the light shines in the darkness” (John 1:4-5).

The linking of Christ and light from darkness is something that Paul already noted in the letter to the Colossians. God’s life is expressed in terms of light, and so also his creation is, first of all, made to reflect the Creator, in being light shining in the dark, formless chaos. In the Nicene Creed, Christ is, as we know, described as “Light from Light.” This follows a long biblical tradition. Whereas here God first creates light, God himself is light, as seen when the Psalmist prays, “LORD, show us the light of your face!” (Ps 4:7).

This luminosity is contagious from God to Moses, who “did not know that the skin of his face had become radiant while he spoke with the LORD” (Exod 34:29).

But it is in the Gospels that the role of light with reference to God becomes pronounced, especially in the accounts of the Transfiguration, and in the Gospel according to John, where Jesus frequently speaks of himself as light. The light who “shines in the

12. Basil the Great, *Hexæmeron* 5.1, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture 1:15.

darkness” and “was the light of the human race,” as is said of him in Prologue, says to those who follow him: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

Christ rises at dawn on the first day. The echo with the first day of creation resounds clearly. Some of the later Fathers of the Church, Bede and Remigius of Auxerre, comment on the unusual timing of the Resurrection given by Matthew: “After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning . . .” (Matt 28:1). For them, it is a sign of the light that has dawned in the Resurrection of Christ. “The usual order of time is not that evening is followed by dawn,” says Remigius, “but darkens into night; these words show that the Lord gave festivity and brilliance to the whole of this night by the light of his Resurrection.”<sup>13</sup>

### *In God’s Image and Likeness*

We read that God made humankind in his own image and likeness (1:26-27) by giving them rational minds. Indeed, the creation account in Genesis is precisely the genius of the human mind, pondering the mind that created all things. But on Easter Sunday, when God called the true light of the world to exist anew, and there was a new beginning, the man Jesus Christ was the image of God in a new way, not only in his rational mind, but also in his immortality, a human being no longer subject to death in a new creation. As Melito of Sardis said, and as we live in our readings in the Easter Vigil: “the mystery of the Passover is new and old, eternal and temporal, corruptible and incorruptible, mortal and immortal. . . . The law is old, but the Gospel is new; the type was for a time, but grace is forever.”<sup>14</sup>

13. Cited by St. Thomas Aquinas, without further reference, *Catena Aurea*, on Matthew 28:1.

14. *Peri Pascha*, 2–4.

***Questions for Reflection or Discussion***

*Reread the passage with the thought in mind that the story of Creation is also the story of Christ. How does this affect how you experience this text?*

*What is the significance of the Church choosing this First Reading for the Easter Vigil, at which we celebrate the Lord's resurrection?*