

# EXSULET



Exsúltet iam angé-li-ca turba cæ-ló-rum:

The Liturgy for the Easter Vigil begins in darkness, by a fire. The Paschal Candle is blessed and lit from the fire. Its flame is shared with all the participants, the darkness gradually dispelled and the Easter Proclamation, known by its first word in Latin, *Exsultet*, Rejoice, is sung. It is quite long and expresses a great deal about our faith in the Resurrection of Jesus which we have gathered to celebrate. It begins with a threefold invitation to rejoice: to angels, the whole of the earth and the Church. The melody repeats in each of these verses.

Exult, let them exult, the hosts of heaven,  
exult, let Angel ministers of God exult,  
let the trumpet of salvation  
sound aloud our mighty King's triumph!

Be glad, let earth be glad, as glory floods her,  
ablaze with light from her eternal King,  
let all corners of the earth be glad,  
knowing an end to gloom and darkness.

Rejoice, let Mother Church also rejoice,  
arrayed with the lightning of his glory,  
let this holy building shake with joy,  
filled with the mighty voices of the peoples.

The Exsultet is normally sung by a deacon who asks for the grace of God that he may be worth to sing the praises of the Paschal Candle and the risen Christ it represents.

Therefore, dearest friends, standing in the awesome glory of this holy light, invoke with me, I ask you, the mercy of God almighty, that he, who has been pleased to number me, though unworthy, among the Levites, may pour into me his light unshadowed, that I may sing this candle's perfect praises.

He goes on to greet the people in the form we are familiar with from the introduction to the preface of the Eucharistic prayer.

The Lord be with you.  
**And with your spirit.**  
Lift up your hearts.  
**We lift them up to the Lord.**  
Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.  
**It is right and just.**

This creates the mood for the rest of the proclamation. The Lord be with you... We are in the presence of the Lord who promised, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in

the midst of them.” (Matthew 18:20). We are invited to raise our hearts and minds to God, like the psalmist (Psalm 86:4), and to remember that, in the presence of Christ, the appropriate attitude is thankfulness.

On this night our thanks are especially focussed on the saving work of Christ

It is truly right and just,  
with ardent love of mind and heart  
and with devoted service of our voice,  
to acclaim our God invisible, the almighty Father,  
and Jesus Christ, our Lord, his Son, his Only Begotten.  
Who for our sake paid Adam's debt to the eternal Father,  
and, pouring out his own dear Blood,  
wiped clean the record of our ancient sinfulness.

Our minds are now directed towards the events of the Passover. We draw a connection between the rescue of the People of Israel from Slavery in Egypt and the delivery of humanity from slavery to sin; the pouring out of the Blood of Christ is compared to the blood of the paschal lamb. This celebration of the resurrection is seen as a new Passover.

These, then, are the feasts of Passover,  
in which is slain the Lamb,  
the one true Lamb,  
whose Blood anoints the doorposts of believers.

Like the night of the Passover, brought alive each year by the Jewish community, this night, the night of the Easter vigil, which makes present to us the risen Christ, is a holy night. As we do in the Liturgy of the Word the proclamation mentions details of the Exodus Story. Four times we hear the cry, “This is the night...”

This is the night,  
when once you led our forebears, Israel's children,  
from slavery in Egypt  
and made them pass dry-shod through the Red Sea.

This is expressed more fully in Exodus 14:15-15, the third reading from the Old Testament

This is the night  
that with a pillar of fire  
banished the darkness of sin

The Pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night are described in Exodus 12:21-22 and alluded to in many places e.g. Deuteronomy 1:33, Psalm 78:14. For the Christian it evokes the idea of Jesus as the light. John 8:12

This is the night  
that even now throughout the world,  
sets Christian believers apart from worldly vices  
and from the gloom of sin,  
leading them to grace

and joining them to his holy ones.

No matter how mighty the works of God at the time of the Exodus, the effect of the death and resurrection of Christ is even mightier. St John says that to those who place their trust in him Christ, "Gave power to become children of God." (John 1:12) St Paul says, "everyone of you who has been baptised has been clothed in Christ." (Galatians 3:27)

This is the night  
when Christ broke the prison-bars of death  
and rose victorious from the underworld.

Paul tells us that the risen Christ is to be King until all his enemies are made his footstool and that, "the last of the enemies to be done away with is death." (1 Corinthians 15:26) Now 'prison-bars' of death itself has been destroyed; "Death is swallowed up in victory. (1 Cor 15: 54) The proclamation seems to compete with itself in their increasing extravagance of its statements

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

So all-embracing is the redemption achieved for each of us by Christ, which we celebrate on this night, that it that it overshadows even the wonder of our coming into being. Following on the acknowledgement of this profound truth of our faith is a series of five expressions of amazement.

O wonder of your humble care for us!

O love, O charity beyond all telling,  
to ransom a slave you gave away your Son!

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

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

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

Among these are references to the story of the Fall, in the Book of Genesis chapter 3. Paradoxically the sin of Adam, described by Irenaeus and Augustine as 'original sin' is called 'necessary'; it is a 'happy fault', a cause of refoicing since out of it came so glorious a redeemer to repair the damage it wreaked. Then, once more we have the cry, "This is the night..."

This is the night  
of which it is written:  
The night shall be as bright as day,  
dazzling is the night for me, and full of gladness.

The formula 'It is written...' introduces a biblical quotation. Here the quotation is from the Psalms: "...even the darkness is not dark to You, but the night shines like the day, for darkness is as light to You." (139:12) The context is different. The psalmist is talking about God's complete knowledge of him. Here the wonder of wonders is revealed mere mortals. Moving on, the word 'night' is now used as a metonym for the redemptive work of Christ. It has changed the world in ways which put us in mind of the *Magnificat*. (luke 1:46-55)

The sanctifying power of this night  
dispels wickedness, washes faults away,  
restores innocence to the fallen, and joy to mourners,  
drives out hatred, fosters concord,  
and brings down the mighty.

Our attention now returns to the candle, symbolising the risen Christ, before which this proclamation is being sung and which is being offered to the Father.

On this, your night of grace, 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.

But now we know the praises of this pillar,  
which glowing fire ignites for God's honour,  
a fire into many flames divided,  
yet never dimmed by sharing of its light,  
for it is fed by melting wax,  
drawn out by mother bees  
to build a torch so precious.

There is a similarity to the Offertory of the Mass: Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation..." Here the candle is called. "work of bees, and of your servants..." The word 'pillar' is used to describe the candle, reminiscent of the pillar of fire in Exodus, mentioned earlier. From antiquity beeswax was the preferred fuel for candles. It burns more brightly, is aromatic. The Greeks believed, erroneously, that bees generated spontaneously from animal corpses. They came to be seen as a symbol of resurrection. Only the best is good enough for something which is to be offered to God as a symbol of Christ. Far from being diminished when its flame is shared, as among the congregation who are participating in this liturgy, its light is enhanced.

O truly blessed night,  
when things of heaven are wed to those of earth,  
and divine to the human.

A final acclamation speaks of the wonder of the incarnation, the mystery whose working out is accomplished in the event we now celebrate. The candle is sometimes, fancifully, seen as symbolic of incarnation: the mundane wick – humanity – is intimately involved in the production of the mysterious flame – divinity.



Therefore, O Lord,  
we pray you that this candle,  
hallowed to the honour of your name,  
may persevere undimmed,  
to overcome the darkness of this night.  
Receive it as a pleasing fragrance,  
and let it mingle with the lights of heaven.  
May this flame be found still burning  
by the Morning Star:  
the one Morning Star who never sets,  
Christ your Son,  
who, coming back from death's domain,  
has shed his peaceful light on humanity,  
and lives and reigns for ever and ever.  
Amen.

The proclamation ends with a plea to the father to accept the offering of this candle and a request that the effects of what it symbolises may continue undiminished until the second coming of Christ. Christ is referred to as the 'Morning Star' by the Venerable Bede in his commentary on Revelation 2:28 in words which appear on his tomb in Durham Cathedral: "Christ is the Morning Star, who when the night of this world is past, gives to his saints the promise of the light of life, and opens everlasting day." This refers to the death of the believer, the second coming of Christ from another perspective.