In the 1780s, England was a dark place. Poor children worked as many as 18 hours a day in cotton mills and coal mines, while many of their parents drank themselves into early graves. The rich gave little though tot the hungry and homeless crowding the city's streets. Instead, they spent their time drinking, gambling, having affairs and counting their profits from the slave trade.

William Wilberforce, the son of a wealthy businessman, was too busy enjoying life to be bothered by the wrongs around him. He was a student at the University of Cambridge. he made several friends there who would soon become powerful men in Britain, including one who was elected the prime minister.

William was known to be funny, charming and popular. When he graduated, he ran for Parliament. Because of his well-known family, his speaking ability, and the generous feast he held for voters on election day, he won easily.

He was liked by members of both political parties, and was welcomed at all the best places and social events. He also went to church. But church going didn't really affect his actions until a pastor showed him that he needed to know Jesus personally. After he trusted in Christ and began praying more and reading the Bible, he saw how his life was ultimately empty; he'd spend spare time living the "good life" traveling, gambling, being somewhat carefree. Then he got more serious. At first he wanted to get out of politics so that he could concentrate on God. A wise man told him to say where he was and let God use him there.

When he tried to talk about his faith though, his old friends thought he was crazy. This was a time, not unlike our own, when "polite" society as it was called looked at active religion as a bit odd in England. Those who were open about their faith and enthusiasm for it, including a few members of parliament were ridiculed. In William's case, his "friends" couldn't understand how such a well-educated man could get "carried away" with religion. Initially he thought maybe he should leave public office. John Newton, the man who wrote "Amazing Grace" and then became a minister, gave him the advice not to do that. And so he decided to stay in public life, and at the same time not divorce his faith from his public beliefs. He wrote a book, and urged people to not hide their faith. In

Then there was a revolution in France, and many powerful people in Britain began to feel uncertain about their own future. They read William's writings, became interested in spiritual things, and began attending church in large numbers.

At the same time, he found new friends who were committed to their Christian faith, Thomas Clarkson and a group of activists. He also would talk to Rev. James Ramsay, a ship's surgeon who became a minister and medical supervisor of plantations; what he saw the slaves go through horrified him, and Rev. Ramsay wrote a book condemning the slave trade.These Christian friends made him realize how horrible the slave trade was. And Wilberforce, as a member of parliament, decided to try to do something about it. His faith was informing his public actions, and he knew God was calling him to proclaim this faith to the world.

It took a little thinking, praying and prodding, from his friends, but he then began what would become a long, bitter battle to pass a law so that no more slaves would be brought into Britain starting in 1787. It was on May 12, 1787, the still hesitant Wilberforce held a conversation with William Pitt and the future Prime Minister William Grenville as they sat under a large oak tree on Pitt's estate in Kent where he knew now was the time to put his faith out there in this very public way.

It began with meetings between Quakers and Anglicans and raising public awareness with support growing throughout the UK. In 1789 he made his first major speech in the House of Commons on abolition and morally reprehensible.

The men though who made money buying and Britain had been involved in the slave trade since the 16th century; suger, tobacco and cotton came to the UK as a part of it, and it made up about 80% of the UK's foreign income. Slave ships from Britain carried 40,000 a year. It was a huge enterprise. As such, the people involved in selling slaves were very powerful and hard to fight. They bought votes in Parliament and argued that stopping the slave trade would hurt many other businesses in the country.

When he first asked for a law outlawing the evil practice, Parliament stalled. They agreed to gather information just so that they could put off making a decision. Year after year, William tried to get his law passed. He and his friends spent nine and ten hours a day reading and gathering evidence on the horrors and cruelty of the slave trade. An early vote in 1790 failed 163 to 88. This began a yearly effort, but it seemed people wanted to ignore it or put it on the back burner or come up with excuses why it couldn't pass. There were delays, stall tactics, a War with France. Willberforce also fell ill himself one year. William's enemies struck back. They spread vicious lies about him and ridiculed him in the media. Still he fought on. In 1796, with public opinion on his side, it looked as if his law would finally pass. But 12 of the men who supported it were so sure it would pass that they missed the final vote. It was defeated by four votes.

But he was undeterred. He kept working the court of public opinion; speaking; putting out pamphlets and fighting back. Eventually by 1806, he got a law banning Brittish subjects from participating or aiding in the slave trade to French Colonies passed; and the next year the Slave Trade Act was finally passed. Wilberforce was moved to tears when the other members of parliament stood up and applauded him. It took 20 years, and he died shortly thereafter, but finally the slaves were freed.

At the start of his efforts, there were two other committed Christians in Parliament. By the end of his life, there were more than 100 in each House. God used Wilberforce to help change the world.

On this our biggest feast day, we are reminded that ours is an amazing heritage of faith, and that we have a life-changing message to share with the world.

Notice in the readings there are details. Peter speaks of being one who ate and drank with Jesus. In the Gospel from Easter Sunday the Beloved Disciple John and Peter get to the tomb, and we are told that it is empty but have the details of the burial cloth and head cloth being rolled up and in different spaces. If this were just some made up story, we wouldn't have these particular details. And the women in the Gospel are women on a mission, they are the ones who immediately go and and tell Peter and the others. They clearly get the message and respond to it.

The starting point are the words of the angel: Come and see. They are invited to come and see the place where Jesus had been and is no more for He is risen. It's the same invitation that is given to us. But do we do this seriously?

Wilberforce was a Christian in the sense he believed in God. But his life hadn't undergone the transformation necessary for the faith to really take root; like so many around him at the time, religion wasn't seen as all that important. We've answered the angels invitation to come and see by being here around the Easter fire tonight; around the Paschal Candle. Our candidates and catechumens who are entering the Church tonight have answered it by studying the faith. But if we want to see, we have to really make an effort to come to know God. To have a real relationship with Him through prayer, through listening to Him, through being with Him at Mass and allowing ourselves to be fed by Him; to think about our faith. Easter reminds us our final destination is not the tomb or the ashes, but rather heaven. But faith requires a response and coming to know God. So take the steps to foster that relationship with God. Take the steps to think about the faith by using an app like Hallow or online resources like Fr. Mike Schmidt's Bible in a Year, or Bishop Robert Baron's Word on Fire. There's so much good stuff out there, but so often we as Catholics don't want to "come and see" because we think other things matter more. Just a little bit each day or week can do so much to equip us to "go and tell" which the angel tells the women to do. Odds are it will challenge you. Sometimes I hear in confession "doubt," and I remind people doubt is the companion of faith. People will struggle at times in belief; but also in believing that in Her teachings, the Church has one interest at heart - salvation of souls. It's why She speaks on issues up and down through the ages, from slavery to racism, to the sanctity of marriage, to the rights of the unborn, to gender and immigration. The problem is in our day and age we might not want to come to see the why behind the teaching, or prayerfully hear the Church out. But our faith isn't there to be a burden or diminish us, it's there to help us reach our potential and to be truly happy - not the fake happiness of the world that would say do what you want - but the true happiness of salvation. So let us come to make it a matter of the head and heart like Wilberforce did as did so many other Christians over the ages.

Doing this has consequences. The Cross was a source of shame for those in the ancient world; the last thing you would do would be to say "this is my King" and then point to a cross, which would say the Romans had real power and killed an enemy of the state. Yet Christians came to embrace the cross and share the story of it's meaning, telling the story of what Christ has done for us all. The Holy Spirit empowers the apostles to boldly proclaim; the same Spirit that caused Wilberforce to bring his faith

into the public square. But the question for us all is do we have the courage to do this? When we do, we make a profound difference. You take for instance the pro-life movement; we have an amazing group here at Saint Joes, striving to pray, to educate, to help people chose life and people know of God's love and mercy. Over the years it seemed like nothing would change on the issue; and then we had the landmark Dobbs decision overturning Roe v. Wade last summer. The fight goes on, but lives are saved. But doing this has a cost. People will do what they always do; they will become angry; they will mock; in some cases yell obscene things when they peacefully pray in public or try to change hearts and minds. It's what causes some to be afraid to speak up or to say "have you really thought about this issue?" Yet others are undeterred, and it's an honor to know them and to know many in the pro-life movement. This is the cost though of being a Christian. The message of the world over the years is keep your religion to yourself, don't share it. But ask yourself a question: is the cross a decoration for you, or jewelry or just something that's for a steeple, or for us a statement to the world that as a Christian, I live in this world, but I am also different - I am focused on the next, and want to change this world for the better, to evangelize like Peter and the apostles, like Wilberforce. We are to say God's love is more powerful than any government or bully or someone trying to cancel me. We are here to say this is a sign of heaven and will turn the world upside down, not through violence or hate, but by listening to the angel: being not afraid. Being not afraid to say I love you as a person, but this is what I believe and here is why I believe it, let's have a conversation not a shouting match. Being not afraid to say I'm Catholic and here's why, would you like to come to Mass with me. Being not afraid to say I'll pray with you, not just for you. Being not afraid to say "no" when everyone else is saying "yes" to trying this or looking at that when we know it's wrong. Being not afraid to say "Im worried about you" when we see someone making a bad moral choice in life. Being not afraid to stand up or stand out when we maybe the only one in a group who takes a contrary view to what is popular. Being not afraid to talk to our kids as they grow up about why faith matters so much more than sports, even school. This isn't easy; and it requires perseverance because as Wilberforce found out, change can take time when trying to convert minds and hearts. But we are here for a reason, for the story of Christ's life, death and resurrection has no life, no power unless it is told to others, unless we answer Christ's call to "go and tell" this story in the corners of the world we know as our home, school, work, our neighborhood and community. The resurrected Christ empowers us, for if God's love is greater than any worldly force, let's not be afraid to share it.

What strikes me at every Easter Vigil is how we begin in the darkness and light the fire, and the candles illumine the sanctuary with a beautiful glow. The lights are then turned up as we sing the Gloria and Alleluia. But the symbolism there as we hold those candles is we are meant to bring the light into the world which can be so dark; for the Devil is working overtime to seduce and manipulate and destroy hearts, minds and souls. Today my friends is a call to action - not to find the Easter Basket and get home for ham, but a time to get serious about our faith and why we are here. To remind ourselves how much we are loved and what Jesus has done for us, but to also remind ourselves that we have a job to do. To "go and tell." Let us truly be not afraid to do that, knowing that like Wilberforce, we too can change the world if only we choose to do so and not keep our

faith just here in the church, but bring it out to the greater world so all can come to know the God who is love, and how to follow Him.