St George’s Anglican Church Malvern

Sermons from The Three Great Days:

Maundy Thursday,

Good Friday and

Easter Day

preached by the Vicar.

A traditional icon of the resurrection

April 2017
Maundy (Holy) Thursday 2017
Exodus 12.1-14   Psalm 116, 1-2, 11-18
1 Corinthians 11.23-26   John 13.1-17, 31b-35

Tonight is a once a year, intimate and yet grand act of worship. We gather in the evening today, when normally we gather in the morning. We are fewer in number tonight, for too many in the parish have yet to discover the beauty of this night’s worship.

Tonight we will wash feet because Jesus knelt to do that for his friends. Think about that act for a moment. Don’t imagine that Jesus gathered his friends around and said something along the lines of paying attention while he taught them a new solemn ritual to re-enact in respectful silence.

I think it happened like this: Jesus had gone to Jerusalem to keep the great Passover feast. It was one of the three pilgrimage feasts in the Jewish calendar. As we shall see tomorrow, Jesus seems to have chosen to confront those opposed to his mission at Passover, a context that then becomes key to interpreting his death and resurrection.

This year the first evening of Passover was last Monday. As has happened before, a Jewish family hired our hall and celebrated there. I was again invited to join them. This year I was able to be there for the prayers and ritual at the beginning of the meal but then I came over to the church with a piece of matzo – unleavened bread – to use for our Monday evening Eucharist. Later I went back joined the family for the rest of the meal. It was a big gathering of three generations, with children running around and everybody happy to be together, catching up on what had happened since they last gathered. It was joyous and noisy as well as religious.

I think the gathering in the upper room was a bit like that. Jesus’ friends would have been busy during the day getting everything ready. His women relatives and friends would have prepared the food and the room. The men would have gathered for the meal and as they arrived the talk would have
been of what was going on in the streets of Jerusalem, the crowds that had arrived for the festival, the pilgrims whose speech gave them away as not Judeans but from the various regions around the country and beyond where Jews lived. Some complained no doubt about what things were costing this year, especially the price of a lamb to roast whole, the number of Roman soldiers on the streets and the nuisance of having Pilate take up residence in Jerusalem and not Caesarea Maritima, where he preferred to live on the Mediterranean coast. In they came, Jesus’ disciples talking at a rate of knots, hot, dusty and in high spirits.

So, Jesus takes a towel and a basin of water to wash their feet while they are all at the table together. He doesn’t do this because he wants to be religious; he doesn’t do this because he wants to play act being a servant; he does this because these are his friends, and he loves them. Jesus is willing to do the most ordinary, most menial task for them because he has the kind of humility that can cope with becoming as if he is a servant to his friends.

What we see is not just the humility of Jesus the man; we see the humility of God; the very nature of God being shown to us. We first saw it in the Christmas event. God, the source and power of all life in this billions of years of old universe, takes human flesh as a baby. The One who created all that is, seen and unseen, comes among us completely vulnerable to us. We often comment on how tiny and helpless babies are; they are completely at our mercy and utterly dependent on others for food and warmth and above all for love. Without any of these things babies do not thrive and their lives are destroyed or distorted.

We are too quick to say ‘incarnation’ when we speak of this extraordinary mystery, that divinity should come to us clothed in such frail flesh. The tremendous paradox of it brought shepherds and wise men to their knees, and now it brings Jesus to his. This too is incarnation.
True humility is not thinking or saying, ‘I am of no real account, I shouldn’t matter too much.’ That might have been the attitude you were given in childhood; especially if you are female. But that is not true humility! True humility isn’t thinking less of yourself. It is valuing yourself properly, as God does, and seeing yourself as a creature of God alongside all else and all others God creates. It’s not being weak. True humility is service to others, service to a cause greater than your own personal ambition. That takes strength of character. As the thoughtful Christian apologist, C. S Lewis said, ‘Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself less.’

True humility comes from accepting that we are of the hummus, the earth; that we are created, that we are human, and we are not God after all!

But having washed the feet of his friends, Jesus doesn’t say to them, ‘go around being humble’ but ‘love one another. This is how people will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.’

We show our love for one another is just the same way Jesus showed his, in spontaneous acts of loving, human kindness. We show it when we are warm and generous with each other, natural and even sometimes embarrassingly real with each other; and when we speak up for those who can’t find their voice or give from our resources to those who have too few. We recognise it as valuable and beautiful when we see it, which is why so many love the BBC television series Call the Midwife. Those stories are replete with this kind of love, motivated for the Anglican sisters of Nonnatus House, by their love of God made known in Christ Jesus.

So we gather tonight to remember Jesus’ love for his friends – among whom we count ourselves – and to learn how to be loving in our dealings with each other herein this ‘upper room and it’s intimacy, and beyond in a world sorely lacking in loving humility.
**Good Friday**

Readings Isaiah 52.13-53.12   Psalm 22
1 Corinthians 1.18-31   John 18.1-19.42

Someone asked me once why did Jesus die. I said it was because he had been born. I wasn’t trying to be smart. Jesus birth, anyone’s birth is the first cause of their death. If you think about it, that is a thoroughly theological affirmation of what we call the incarnation – the central assertion of our faith that the Word of God took human flesh and came among us as one of us, captive to our mortality.

Of course, the person was actually asking me how I understood the meaning of Jesus’ death, the central focus of our prayer and worship today. We would not exhaust exploring that if we were to spend the rest of our lives here, and do nothing else!

The meaning of Jesus’ death is much debated among Christians, never more so than at present. It is something I often ponder myself. How can the death of one man change the world; what is it about Jesus’ dying that changes everything? For that is what our faith proclaims about his death.

The first thing to say is that when it came to interpreting Jesus’ death just the fact that he was crucified had no particular meaning for the earliest believers. The Romans crucified tens of thousands of Jews in the first century. It was a hideous but familiar sight in Jesus’ day.

We gaze upon the crucified One and we are rightly shocked to see the brutality of it; the injustice of being executed by the state in defence of its own power; the sheer inhumanity of being traded by a friend and deserted by all but a handful. The cross is a mirror to us of the worst we humans do to one another but we have only to turn on the television or the iPad, or open the newspaper to see the daily repeats of such violence and abuse played out around the world, in our own city and maybe even next door.
So what is crucial to understanding Jesus’ death, if not its means? Certainly the time of year matters decisively. There are three great pilgrimage feasts in the calendar but all the gospels tell us that Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem for the Passover. It was then that Jesus intuited his coming confrontation with the Temple keepers and the Roman occupiers would be seen as God once more taking charge of Israel’s life. So, here we are today, gathered in the same week that our Jewish neighbours are still keeping their Passover this year. (The Jewish, Eastern and Western Christian calendars rarely coincide as neatly as this remarkable year.)

Passover is the great celebration of freedom, of God freeing the Hebrew slaves from Pharaoh’s control. Moses had dared to confront the might of Egypt so that the Hebrew slaves would be free to worship their God. The climax the book of Exodus is the making of a tabernacle, a tent for the worship of God, a place on ‘earth’ where ‘heaven’ could be entered; where heaven and earth meet as always intended. This temporary tent’s successor, the grand Temple in Jerusalem, built and rebuilt over the centuries, was meant to be such a place. We know that Jesus found it wanting, and dramatically cleared it out one day to make the point.

Choosing Passover also meant choosing the meal we now call the Holy Eucharist and giving it a new meaning. Instead of looking back to the Exodus, Jesus looked ahead, turning the focus of the meal around from the rescue of Israel from slavery in Egypt, to the redemption of the whole creation. In commanding us to ‘do this’: to take bread and break it, to take wine and share it, Jesus gave us a story to enact, in truth to live by. He has given us a means by which to enter into the events of his death and his resurrection because we too are slaves in need of freeing – slaves to the powers that hold the world captive to injustice, violence, greed, hatred and even death itself.

Passover became the lens through which the earliest followers understood Jesus’ death, but they did not begin
to do so until he had been raised from the dead. With the raising of Jesus from the dead came the ‘game changer’ of all time. Everyone knew, still knows, the dead don’t just come back to life. Something had happened for the One they had seen crucified now to appear before them, transformed and clearly full of life beyond the imagining.

Gradually, over time, through prayer and pondering the Hebrew scriptures, Rabbi Saul and others came to believe that Israel’s God, the God of covenant love and promise, the God who had married divinity to frail flesh, had overturned and overcome – in Jesus’ faithful life of unbroken listening to God – all that has the power to destroy God’s creation. Paul, the apostle, as Saul became known, spent years interpreting the death of Jesus in the light of the life he now lives.

So today we do well to feel the shame and the sorrow of the cross as this symbol mirrors to us the very worst of our human captivity to inhumanity. We do well to bring that shame and sorrow here and to turn to God, for only God can remedy what distorts and breaks the human heart.

Ponder this mystery deeply, but only as you also ponder this other great truth. The raising of Jesus from the dead mirrors to us the promise of God to bring life from death, not in some future disembodied way in a far off heaven, but now. This new life begins for us now since Jesus already lives the new reality now, and our lives are hidden in his.

And ponder this also, the death of Jesus not only frees humanity, but the whole creation, all that God has made which is subject to decay. What those who first grasped this extraordinary reality have left us is a story, not a systematic explanation, but a story to be told and retold, a cross shaped story that gives meaning to every act of love we do in Jesus’ name and which draws us to its telling as we keep the new Passover, the once and for all freedom won on that first Friday we now call ‘good’.
Easter Day
Acts 10.34-43  Hymn to the Risen Christ  Colossians 3.1-4
Matthew 28.1-10

If the Easter story had been the idle tale some thought at the time, it would not have become the story we are hearing as we keep this central and oldest of Christian celebrations. Easter was celebrated long before Christmas.

Let’s be honest: the Easter story is extraordinary; it is hard to credit and yet it continues to speak to our deepest longings and certainly meets our deepest needs. But more than that it is a story of the whole creation being renewed and freed from the powers to which we are all captive, and even death itself.

The earliest keepers of the story did not make it easy for themselves. If you and I were trying to convince the world that Jesus had been raised from the dead, we would wrote a few things differently I reckon.

There would be none of the ambiguity of what kind of body a risen one happens to be. The risen Christ was immediately recognisable sometimes, as in Matthew’s account. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary know straightaway who Jesus is when he speaks to them, and they worship him. And yet at other times, even those who had known him well fail to recognise him until he chooses to be known. Sometimes he is able to eat, to share a meal of fish on the seashore as if nothing had changed. This story from the gospel according to john is depicted over the gate to the parish Memorial Garden and above the Book of Remembrance. And yet another time Jesus is able to appear behind locked doors, since everything about his risen body had changed completely.

Women, considered unreliable witnesses back then, would not be the first to bring the news that the tomb where they had seen Jesus buried is now empty and that he had appeared to them, if we were making this up.
The raising of Jesus to new life was beyond human imagining, but in the purposes of God, not beyond the telling by those who first experienced the new thing God was now doing.

Like most of people of their day, Jesus and the disciples lived in hope of the resurrection of the dead at a time they called ‘the last day’. That was a future time when God would mend all that was broken in creation and restore human life to the fullness only God can give.

But now, those first witnesses discovered, that new day has dawned with the rolling away of the stone. Now, all is changed and our world with it.

This is the big picture story of Easter, God’s bold, radical remedy for a world that falls short of the glory for which God made it. We western Christians often think faith in the God who raised Jesus is just a personal matter; that it is about God and me and a future in heaven. But the raising of Jesus is so very, very, very much more.

It is God beginning now to free us from the powers that destroy, powers that enslave us and the whole creation and bring only destruction and death.

We know these powers. Each of us in our own way is held in their thrall but Easter breaks the bonds if we are willing to receive God’s freedom as we re-orient our lives to the new reality. The resurrection of Jesus Christ releases for us God’s radical freedom to choose the power of love over love of the false powers of this world.

We certainly know that these powers hold the world’s nations captive to injustice, violence, greed, hatred and even death itself. It’s the daily news, it’s the powerlessness we feel when we know about appalling events in our world and yet we humans seem never to remedy the circumstances that cause them, or at least not for long.

If we are being honest, we know that the ‘systems’ we humans
create eventually fail us, even the best of our social arrangements. Time and time again, we humans fall into a kind of idolatry, and give ourselves to anything and everything but what will genuinely enable us to become truly human, which is God’s purpose for us.

We have claimed many freedoms, but in their name found new forms of enslavement to these powers. We accept a growing inequality between the haves and have nots, we tolerate leaders who offer little more than slogans and seek not so much the common good as the power to stay in office; we disengage from the wider world on the grounds that it is all too complex - and it is complex, but that is no excuse. Our inaction delivers us into the hands of the very chaos we long not to engulf our world.

We are shocked and outraged by the stories of the victims of all kinds of abusive behaviours and are rightly angry that abusers prey on the vulnerable, but our society encourages a spirit of vengeance and fails to see that only fuels hurt, doing nothing to enable forgiveness and healing.

We know how much all people need to be drawn to the crucified and risen One whose death and now resurrection have opened the gates to human freedom. If we did not at the very least intuit this, if we were not at the very least intrigued by what difference God at work in Jesus Christ makes, I assume we would be elsewhere right now. But here we are, keeping this most ancient of Christian festivals, through which we are invited by God to find ourselves by joining in God’s great project to reconcile and restore all peoples and the whole created world through Jesus, risen Christ.

Yes this is a personal story for you and me and a story of hope in God and in what God will do. But it is also a global, indeed cosmic story, of being freed now to reflect God’s image to one another as we worship together, and in the gift of his Spirit with us now, work with our risen brother, Jesus Christ to release the power of God’s love in our broken world. It is for this that God raised Jesus; it is for this that we are raised with him.

Christ is risen! Alleluia!
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