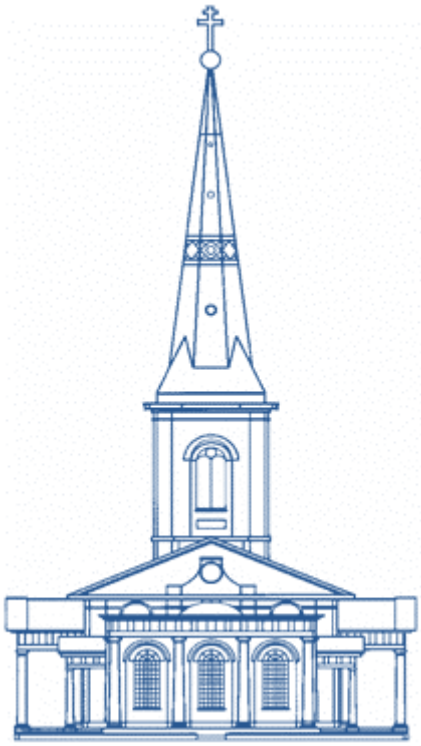
ST JAMES' CHURCH, KING STREET,
SYDNEY, NSW



HOLY WEEK AND EASTER SERMONS 2021

Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh, AM

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Having been previously Ordained into the ministry of the Methodist Church, Michael served in both a parish and as Vice-Master of Wesley College, University of Sydney. He was received into the Anglican Church in 1982 and licensed as a Diocesan Reader in 1983. He has been a regular preacher at St James', King Street, Sydney since then.

Michael retired from teaching social policy in the University of Sydney in 1999 and is now an honorary associate professor at the university. He is an adjunct research professor at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture of Charles Sturt University. He is also a part-time member of the Administrative Appeals Tribunal.

From 2000-2007 he chaired the Academic Board of the Sydney College of Divinity, where he was an adjunct professor. In 2005 the Sydney College of Divinity awarded him the degree of Doctor of Theology *honoris causa*.

PREFACE

Shortly after my retirement from the University of Sydney in mid-1999, Bev and I took a course at St George's College in Jerusalem. Entitled "Pilgrimage and Spirituality", the course examined the link between a physical pilgrimage to the Holy Land and a person's spiritual pilgrimage. Although we visited a number of sites, we were not tourists in the ordinary sense. The sites that we visited were chosen for specific purposes related to parts of a spiritual pilgrimage. It was on this course that I first heard of Egeria, the woman whose three-year pilgrimage to the Holy Land forms the foundation of this Holy Week and Easter series of sermons.

Egeria lay somewhere in the recesses of my mind, only to emerge when I was invited to be this year's Holy Week preacher. One needs to be careful about what one wishes. As a preacher, I listen to sermons from a viewpoint that leads me often to think how I would handle the question were I the preacher. Needless to say, I do that every Holy Week. This year I had that opportunity and to do it "at home"; not elsewhere. It is a great and terrifying privilege to lead my fellow-parishioners through this important time. Egeria came to my rescue.

What we know of Egeria comes from an incomplete 11th century manuscript discovered in 1884 in a monastic library in Arezzo, Italy, where it had been, bound into a volume of the works of Hilary of Poitiers, since the mid-16th century. The volume had previously been in the library of the famous Benedictine Monastery at Monte Cassino, where, in 1137, the librarian, Peter the Deacon, had quoted her in a book about holy places.

Nothing is known of Egeria apart from her manuscript, which has received considerable attention from scholars. They date her trip to about 381-384. The lost parts of the manuscript include her accounts of both the beginning and end of her pilgrimage, so we don't know exactly where she came from. She records that she had crossed the Rhone River, which locates her in the western Mediterranean, possibly in France or, as is now mostly accepted, Galicia in Spain.

Egeria could both speak and write Latin. Her style is not scholarly and she does not show any traces of what would, in her day, have been a classical education. Apparently, her grammar is a little erratic and she uses some words in strange ways. Nevertheless, her writing is clear and competent. The manuscript is in the form of letters addressed to her "beloved sisters". This has led to speculation that she belonged to a religious community but it cannot have been enclosed in any way, otherwise she may not have undertaken her journey in the first place or lingered so long away. Her trip would not have been cheap, so she must have had some means. She travelled alone, which indicates that she had sufficient social status to command respect and to be safe.

Egeria's pilgrimage began and ended in Constantinople, modern Istanbul. The timing of events, places her in Jerusalem most probably for Holy Week in 384AD, when the date of Easter, 24 March, was early enough to allow her to be in other places on specified saints' days. What she describes is close to what we now do. Clergy and religious in Jerusalem had many services each day, especially in Lent, which did not end until Maundy Thursday. Egeria describes all these, but I have chosen to refer only to those services that would have been attended by the laity, who, of course, had to work during the day.

We also know that Egeria was not the only woman to make such a pilgrimage. Earlier in the 4th century, St Helena, the mother of Constantine, went to Jerusalem and was credited with discovering the true cross, which was still preserved there in Egeria's time. Just before Egeria, St Paula of Rome, an associate of St Jerome, who recorded her travels, made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, ultimately establishing a convent in Bethlehem.

Women are important for our Holy Week pilgrimage. Apart from those of the 4th century, the women amongst the followers of Jesus play a crucial role in what happened. We ought, at all times, but especially at this time, to honour them.

Michael
Holy Week and Easter 2021

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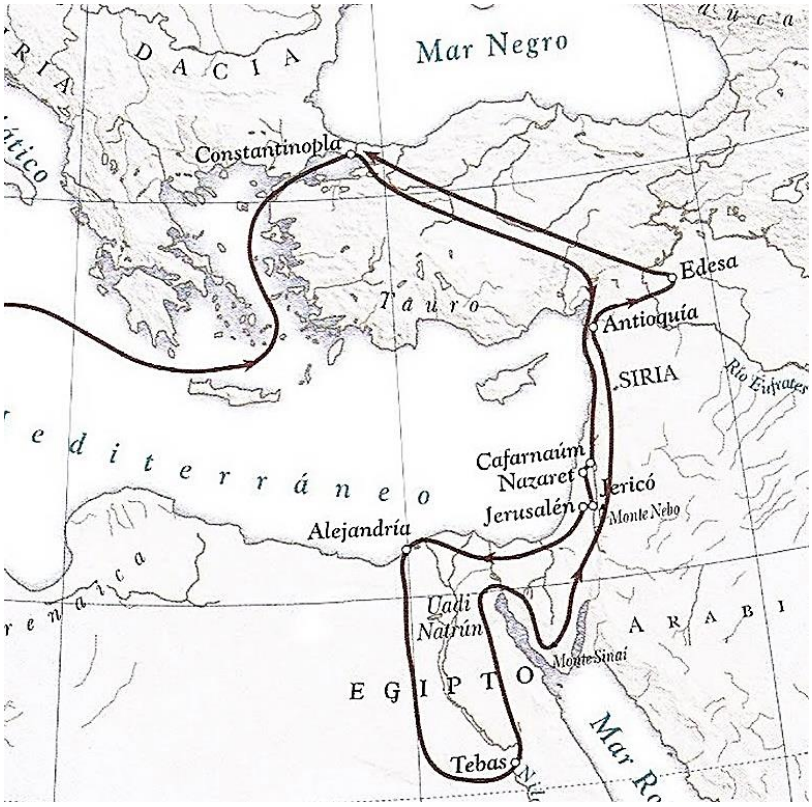
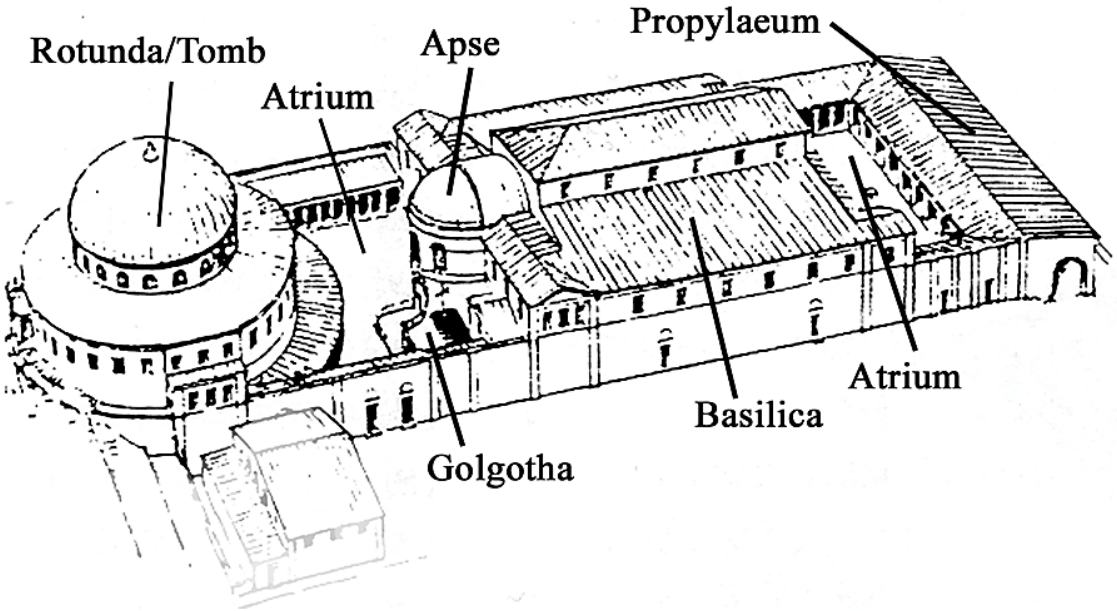


Egeria's Travels



Constantine's Church of the Holy Sepulchre
The baptistery is the unlabelled faint building.

PALM SUNDAY – 28 March 2021

Readings: Palm Liturgy – Psalm 118.1-2,19-29, Mark 11.1-11.
Isaiah 50.4-9a, Psalm 31.9-18, Philippians 2.5-11 & Mark 15.1-39.

To be a Pilgrim

In the late 4th century, around 384AD, a woman named Egeria went on a three-year pilgrimage to the Holy Land and other sacred sites in the East.[2] As far as we can tell, she came from the western Mediterranean, possibly southern France or Spain. What remains of the record of her travels is an incomplete series of letters written to a community of women back home, wherever that was. It is possible that Egeria was a member of a religious community of some kind, but she did not belong to any form of enclosed order. She was under no hurry to return home and extended her travel as she wished. Egeria was most probably of relatively high social status. Her journey must have been costly, so she had independent funds. She travelled alone and the area is known to have been relatively safe under Roman rule, Constantine being the emperor.

Egeria's voyage, after leaving home, began and ended in Constantinople, modern Istanbul. Travelling east and south, she went to the Sinai Peninsula, at the top end of the Red Sea, where she visited the monasteries on Mt Sinai, the site of the giving of the Ten Commandments. She travelled back north to the Holy Land, following what was believed to be the route of the Exodus, and east as far as the city of Edessa in what is now the most easterly part of Turkey.

Egeria's time in Jerusalem included the celebration of Holy Week or, as she called it, the Great Week. What we know of ancient liturgical practice in Holy Week is due largely to Egeria's record. We are also fortunate in having a lectionary in use at that time, so we know what biblical readings Egeria would have heard at the various ceremonies.[3]

In this Holy Week, I invite you to join Egeria and me as pilgrims. Why be a pilgrim? That's difficult to answer. Some pilgrims have specific goals: to see a certain place, to have a particular experience. For some, the journey is the most important part. Others may be interested in the people they will meet. Egeria was one of those. She spoke to monks, nuns and clergy wherever she went, drawing on their wisdom. Pilgrimage is not a guaranteed project. You may not find what you sought. Instead, you might be surprised and find something else. What you do find might not be entirely to your liking.

Egeria tells us that, on the Saturday evening before Palm Sunday, services were held at the church in Bethany that stood over the tomb of Lazarus. Amongst the readings used in that service was the end of John 11. This part of the gospel has people, who are gathering in

[2] All references to Egeria come from Anne McGowan and Paul F Bradshaw, *The Pilgrimage of Egeria*, Collegeville, Liturgical Academic Press, 2018
[3] The Armenian Lectionary. An Early Armenian Lectionary (Renoux) – biblicalia (bombaxo.com)

Jerusalem for the Passover the next week, wondering amongst themselves whether Jesus will show up. They consider it highly unwise for him to do so. The authorities have ordered that his arrival should be reported so that they might arrest him. Thus, we know that, whatever happens, Jesus is in great danger.

At the top of the Mount of Olives, Constantine had built a church, called "Eleona", on the site of the Ascension.[4] On Palm Sunday, Christians gathered there and, at about 5 pm, Egeria says:

> … there is read that passage from the gospel where children with branches and palms meet the Lord, saying, "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord." And immediately the bishop rises and all the people go forward from there entirely on foot from the summit of the Mount of Olives. For all the people [go] before him with hymns and antiphons, continually responding, "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord."

Actually, the gospels say nothing about children but, by Egeria's time, that had become the tradition. Everyone walked, including the bishop. They made no attempt to re-enact the event. They had no donkey for the bishop to ride on.

And that is what we have already done this morning. Our short walk was much easier than theirs. The Mount of Olives is separated from Jerusalem by the Kidron Valley. The road down from the Eleona Church is steep and, even today, parts are covered in slippery gravel. Present day tour guides recommend sturdy footwear.[5] The distance to the Lion's Gate, passing the Garden of Gethsemane, is a bit over a kilometre.

When Jesus entered the city, as Matthew and Luke tell us, he went into the Temple and overturned the tables of the money-changers and of those who sold animals for the sacrifices. These people fulfilled important functions in the economy of the Temple. Coins bearing the images of the emperor were not allowed into the precinct because, carrying graven images, they breached the Second Commandment. They had to be changed into proper Temple money. Sacrificial animals were a necessity and had to be available for worshippers. They weren't provided free. It is estimated that 80% of the economy of Jerusalem, with its population of about 100,000, depended on pilgrims to the Temple. Since the worshippers at the Temple needed their services, the traders had captive and, therefore, exploitable customers. Whatever we may think of the trading practices, Jesus won himself few friends by this action, except possibly some pilgrims who would soon go home.

If we look closely at the events of Palm Sunday, we discover that the day had been carefully organised. The owners of the donkey had their animal ready. A password had been organised to let the owners know that the right persons were collecting it. And what of

[4] Church on the Mount of Olives (Eleona) - OrthodoxWiki
[5] Walking the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem (verywellfit.com)

the crowd? Jesus had some followers, in addition to the twelve disciples, who travelled with him. They were not, however, so many as to make a large crowd of the kind described in the gospels. In any case, the Mount of Olives was not a natural gathering place for crowds. These people had come out from the city; they came because they knew that Jesus intended to enter the city. Someone had spread the word. The crowd was deliberate. Nothing about the event was accidental.

Thus, we should understand that Jesus intended that his entry into Jerusalem was to be public. The pharisees did not need to be informed about his presence, he made it known to them. He did it, however, entirely within the context of prophecy as set out in the Hebrew scriptures. He already knew what he would do and say. His entry into Jerusalem on a donkey follows closely the words of Zechariah:

> Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
> Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
> Lo, your king comes to you;
> triumphant and victorious is he,
> humble and riding on a donkey,
> on a colt, the foal of a donkey.[6]

The cry of the crowd came directly from Psalm 118[7] and the waving of palm branches from the successful Maccabean revolt against Greek rulers in the 2nd century BC[8]. When Jesus disrupts the Temple, he quotes, first, Isaiah speaking about a house of prayer. The full text is instructive because it shows that Jesus is implicitly speaking against the exclusive nature of temple worship:

> for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.
> Thus says the Lord God,
> who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
> I will gather others to them
> besides those already gathered.[9]

Second, he quotes Jeremiah:

> Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are safe!'—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the Lord.[10]

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[6] Zechariah 9:9
[7] Psalm 118: 25-26. "Save us" is a translation of the Hebrew, "Hosanna"
[8] 1 Maccabees 13:51
[9] Isaiah 56:7b-8
[10] Jeremiah 7:8-11

Jesus has consistently said that the sacrificial temple will be torn down with no stone left standing upon another. His action against the traders is consistent with his preaching and teaching.

As pilgrims on Palm Sunday, what have we discovered? We have participated in remembering the deliberate acts of Jesus as he begins what will be his final confrontation with the authorities. He is entering the holy city to bring about the final sacrifice. After him, no stone will be left upon another.

'Loss Is Indeed Our Gain' – Walter Brueggemann

The pushing and shoving of the world is endless.
We are pushed and shoved.
And we do our fair share of pushing and shoving
In our great anxiety.
And in the middle of that
You have set down your beloved suffering son
Who was like a sheep led to slaughter
Who opened not his mouth.
We seem not able,
So we ask you to create the spaces in our life
Where we may ponder his suffering
And your summons for us to suffer with him,
Suspecting that suffering is the only way to come to newness.
So we pray for your church in these ~~Lenten~~ days,
When we are driven to denial—
Not to notice the suffering,
Not to engage it,
Not to acknowledge it.
So be that way of truth among us
That we should not deceive ourselves.
That we shall see that loss is indeed our gain.
We give you thanks for that mystery from which we live.
Amen.[11]

[11] Lent #38 – Loss Is Indeed Our Gain | The Porch (wordpress.com)

HOLY MONDAY – 29 March 2021

Readings: Isaiah 42.1-9, Psalm 36.5-11, Hebrews 9.11-15 & John 12.1-11.

Preparing for Death

Egeria, our guide to 4th century Holy Week practices in Jerusalem, tells us that, on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Holy Week, a similar pattern is followed each day:

> At the ninth hour [that is, about 3pm] all gather in the major church, that is, the Martyrium, and there until the first hour of the night [about 7pm] hymns and antiphons are continually recited, readings also appropriate to the day and place are read, prayers always interspersed.

This account needs a little explanation. During the day, the ordinary services for Lent were celebrated. Although the laity were not excluded, these were principally for the clergy and religious. At the end of the day, when the laity could attend, was a service of prayers and readings, ending with vespers or evening prayer.

In about 326AD, the emperor Constantine ordered the destruction of a Roman temple to Venus that Emperor Hadrian had built over the site believed to include the tomb in which the body of Jesus was laid. The demolition revealed a cave that had been filled in and that was identified as the Holy Sepulchre. Constantine then erected a church finally consecrated in 335. His church was much more complex than an ordinary church of the time. It had three distinct sections; a basilica, which was the Martyrium that Egeria referred to, so called because it contained relics and memorials of martyrs; an enclosed colonnade at the site of the crucifixion, where a cross was erected; and a rotunda over the Sepulchre. To achieve the latter, the hill around the cave was stripped away, leaving only sufficient to keep the space enclosed.

Having suffered from fires and earthquakes, the church was finally destroyed by the Caliph Al-Hakim in 1009. The sepulchre, although much damaged, remained. Recent renovations have confirmed that the interior structure of the tomb does date from Constantine's time.[13] The present church dates from 1048.

The three areas in Constantine's church allowed worshippers to move from place to place as appropriate for the specific services. The Holy Week services for the evenings of Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday were held, as Egeria said, in the basilica. The available lectionary says that the gospel for the Monday service was Matthew 20: 17-28. This gospel has two sections. It begins with Jesus predicting his arrest, death and resurrection. The second section has the mother of James and John asking for special privileges for her sons.

[13] Church of the Holy Sepulchre - Wikipedia

Our gospel, on the other hand, is about Mary of Bethany anointing the feet of Jesus. The chronology of John's gospel places this event on the Saturday evening before Palm Sunday. In Egeria's time our gospel was read at the service held in Bethany on that day, as I mentioned yesterday. The gospel begins in a way that is familiar to us for events at the home of Lazarus and his sisters. Martha was in charge of the meal, as she had been on the occasion when she complained to Jesus that her sister had not helped her.[14]

The relationship between Jesus and this household was very deep. Luke tells us that it was Martha who had first welcomed Jesus into their home but it appears that Mary had formed a special attachment to him. We don't know how many times Jesus stayed with them but we might assume that he was there more often than the gospels record. Given that, by this time, Jesus had organised everything for the next day and for much of the next week, this dinner represented the last time that he would be at home with intimate friends.

The past year of pandemic has shown us all how important is our need for intimacy. We have been separated from our loved ones in other states and overseas. We have discovered both how much technology can help us and also how limited it is. Sight and sound are not enough. We need to touch and smell our loved ones.

How precious must this time have been for Jesus. How much he must have wanted everyone present to be behind him, united and supportive. How wrong he was. Our gospel reading, while displaying the intimacy of a dinner with friends, casts us into the middle of the simmering conflict within the group of disciples.

What Mary does is not only extravagant and shocking, it demonstrates a relationship with Jesus that is unique. Although Peter, James and John seem to have been the central core of the disciples, none of them shared this level of intimacy, which was possible only for a woman. Not only that, it appears, from the statements that Jesus made, that Mary had perceived what had escaped the disciples. This was the last free event before his death. She could not be sure that she would have any opportunity to prepare his body for burial and anointed it in advance.

This is not the only occasion in the gospels when a woman has understood Jesus better than the closest of his followers. Although John names Judas as the one who objects to what Mary has done, other versions have the disciples as a group doing the same. It is apparent that John has selected Judas for particular mention, foreshadowing his later role, but there is no reason to suppose that he was the only one who thought Mary's actions to be unjustifiably wasteful, which in a sense they were.

What were these men thinking? Why did they see the need to rebuke Mary? Why did they think it appropriate to put her in her place, which was most probably in the kitchen with Martha? Were they jealous?

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[14] Luke 10:38-42

In making his comment, Judas had a point, even if he made it in an inappropriate manner at the wrong time. In his response, Jesus acknowledged the ever present need to care for the poor. At the same time, he made a simple comparison between the overwhelming events of the next week and the ongoing responsibilities of his followers in the years to come. The gentleness of the response that Jesus made to Judas was in marked contrast to the vitriol of Judas's original comment.

More than that, Jesus affirmed Mary in the face of male opposition. He liberated her to be the disciple she felt called to be. Yet, the transaction was not one way. If we imagine Jesus as some entirely composed person without emotional needs, we are wrong. We know that he wept for Lazarus; here we find him responding to the emotion of another. Jesus not only affirms Mary as a disciple and as a woman, he reveals his own need for love and trust at the very moment when he faces rejection and death.[15]

As pilgrims to Bethany, what have we discovered? Before we can answer that question, we must locate ourselves in the story. As Tom Wright suggests,[16] we can choose between "the shameless Mary, worshipping Jesus with everything she's got", the apparently "cautious, prudent, reliable Judas" or being "back in the kitchen with Martha"? As pilgrims, we might have discovered something that we had not expected, some part of ourselves. Pilgrimage requires honesty. Who would we really see if we looked in the Bethany mirror? If we look at ourselves honestly, it won't really matter who we see. In this gospel story, we have seen as clearly as we can, the humanity of Jesus. As St Gregory of Nazianzus, a fourth-century bishop and theologian, reminds us, "that which God has assumed, God has healed; that which is united to God is also saved".[17] Whoever looks back at us from the mirror is part of the saved humanity that Jesus has assumed.

We have been drawn into an intimate event that was overshadowed by underlying tensions. Through that event and those tensions, we have found a vision of grace, tenderness and strength, attributes that will be in great demand in the following days.
A sonnet by English poet and priest, Malcolm Guite:

The Anointing at Bethany

Come close with Mary, Martha, Lazarus
So close the candles stir with their soft breath
And kindle heart and soul to flame within us
Lit by these mysteries of life and death.
For beauty now begins the final movement
In quietness and intimate encounter

[15] I have taken this thought from Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*, London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004, p. 206. I am aware that Vanier has recently been exposed as an abuser of women. I do not endorse his actions but I think that his comments are correct.
[16] Tom Wright, *John for Everyone Part 2: Chapters 11-21* London, SPCK, 2002, pp. 19-23.
[17] See This is a season of disfiguration. Yet it is also a time of hope. – SSJE

The alabaster jar of precious ointment
Is broken open for the world's true lover,
The whole room richly fills to feast the senses
With all the yearning such a fragrance brings,
The heart is mourning but the spirit dances,
Here at the very centre of all things,
Here at the meeting place of love and loss
We all foresee, and see beyond, the cross.[18]

Mary of Bethany Anointing the Feet of Jesus (c1720-1730)
Sebastianno Ricci (1659-1734)
Royal Collection Trust

HOLY TUESDAY – 7 April 2020

Readings: Isaiah 49.1-7, Psalm 71.1-14, 1 Corinthians 1.18-31 & John 12.20-36.

Driving out this World's Ruler

Egeria, our guide to 4th century Holy Week practices in Jerusalem, tells us that, on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Holy Week, a similar pattern is followed each day:

> At the ninth hour [that is, about 3pm] all gather in the major church, that is, the Martyrium [the basilica], and there until the first hour of the night [about 7pm] hymns and antiphons are continually recited, readings also appropriate to the day and place are read, prayers always interspersed.

[18] Malcolm Guite is a poet-priest and Chaplain of Girton College, Cambridge. The Anointing at Bethany | Malcolm Guite (wordpress.com)

At that service on Tuesday, Egeria would have heard a long gospel reading from Matthew 24:1 to 26:2 in which Jesus teaches his disciples. It includes the parables of the fig tree, the wise and foolish virgins, the talents, and the last judgement. Matthew sets this discourse on the Mount of Olives in Holy Week.

The gospel we have read from John is placed in Jerusalem immediately after the Palm Sunday procession. That does not give us any exact time because the next identifiable day in John's gospel is Maundy Thursday; it could be any day between Sunday and Wednesday. The most probable location is the Temple. Some Greeks have come to worship at the festival, that is, the Passover. "Greeks" is a generic term for non-Jews. Since most of the Roman world spoke Greek rather than Latin, the term means a Greek speaker, not necessarily an ethnic Greek. In any case, they wanted to see Jesus. We're not sure why. Were they genuine seekers, or were they celebrity hunters? Did they want his autograph?

Whatever they wanted, they sought out Philip, a disciple with a Greek name and possibly a Greek speaker. Philip sought out Andrew, another Greek name, and together they approach Jesus. That appears to be the end of the Greeks! Did they get to meet Jesus? We don't know. The words that Jesus speaks in response to their request seem entirely unrelated to them. Jesus goes off on a tangent, it seems.

Jesus first uses an agricultural metaphor to contemplate what is about to happen. He knows now that he will die. He understands that the authorities are simply biding their time for the best opportunity to act. Most probably, they will act at a time attracting the least attention, given that they know, from Palm Sunday, that Jesus has significant support. Nevertheless, Jesus is sure that, if he dies, it will be like the apparent death of a seed sown in the ground. It springs into new life. As Archbishop William Temple suggested in his commentary on John's gospel, the seed must die to itself, lose its present identity, if the new plant is to emerge.[20]

Temple also comments that, whether the Greeks heard him or not, Jesus was contesting a central part of classic Greek philosophy. The Greeks, he says, had no sense of self sacrifice. Jesus argues that self-centredness is, ultimately, self-destruction. This is the meaning of his comments about loving and losing and hating and keeping.

I wonder to whom Jesus is speaking. He appears to be responding to Andrew and Philip, but his words sound as though he is speaking to himself, thinking aloud, and that he is his own audience. Jesus seems to confirm this when he says that his heart is troubled and he wonders whether he should now opt out of his destiny. His answer is no, but the question again confirms the humanity of Jesus. His progress towards the cross is neither inevitable nor accidental; it is intentional.

[20] William Temple, *Readings in St John's Gospel*, London, MacMillan, 1945, p. 195

At this point, the voice comes from heaven. Interestingly, the bystanders are confused about what happened. Some of them think there was a clap of thunder, which is probably the case. Others thought that an angel had spoken to Jesus. This does not mean that they heard a voice but that they interpreted the sound in that way. For Jesus, this was a confirmation of his decision. He also says that the voice came for the hearers. How could that be if they heard only the sound?

It is clear that nobody entirely understood what Jesus then said. He says that, if he is lifted up, he will draw all people to himself. At this point, we see a contrast between what the Greeks asked for and the response Jesus made. The Greeks asked to "see" Jesus. They wanted to be the actors, to meet Jesus on their own terms. What Jesus said was that he would "draw" people to him. Entering into a relationship with Jesus is not entirely our decision; it is not just because we see him. We are drawn to him.

The hearers do understand something that Jesus said. They do understand that "lifting up" means crucifixion. Thinking that Jesus might be the Messiah, who should live forever, they object to the possibility that he will die. They both understand and do not understand. As Tom Wright suggests,

> John wants us to feel not only Jesus' frustration, as in their understanding they seem so close and yet so far away; he wants us to sense the disciples' puzzlement as well. What was Jesus up to? What did he really mean?
> The only clue Jesus will give them at the moment is to speak again about light and darkness. The light is with them for a little while longer, and they must stick with it, walk in it and believe in it. So must we.[21]

The theme of darkness and light is central to our understanding of the events of Holy Week. At the very beginning of his gospel, John says:

> What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.[22]

Yet, it seems now that the candle may be flickering. Even so, Jesus speaks with confidence and says that the world has come to judgement and that its ruler will be driven out. Who is the ruler of this world? In principle, Jesus is talking about the devil, but we need to give some substance to what he is saying. Are we to expect that one ruler will be substituted for another? Will a "demonocracy" be taken over by a theocracy? We are very aware of the terrors of authorities claiming to speak with the voice of God, or having a God-given destiny, or to be executing God's judgements. From the Inquisition through the Salem witch trials to the Holocaust and then ISIS, these forms of overweening hubris have bedevilled us. They truly still represent the ruler of this world.

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[21] Wright, p. 33
[22] John 1:4-5

Tom Wright suggests that:

> … the whole point of the Gospels is that the coming of God's kingdom on earth as in heaven is precisely not the imposition of an alien and dehumanizing tyranny, but rather the confrontation of alien and dehumanizing tyrannies with the news of a God—the God recognized in Jesus—who is radically different from them all, and whose inbreaking justice aims at rescuing and restoring genuine humanness.[23]

That genuine humanness comes through the fully genuine human.

As pilgrims in Jerusalem, what have we discovered? We have heard Jesus say that self-sacrifice is the way to fulfilment. We have heard him say what that meant for him. Actually, we understand that only because we, unlike his hearers, know what happened next. We should not relish that superiority because not seeing what is before our eyes has continued in the church and amongst Christians over two millennia. The times may change, but our inherent blindness does not.

It may be that the COVID-19 pandemic has given us an opportunity to see more clearly what the grain of wheat falling into the ground might mean. A poem by Lynn Unger entitled "Pandemic":

> What if you thought of it
> as the Jews consider the Sabbath—
> the most sacred of times?
> Cease from travel.
> Cease from buying and selling.
> Give up, just for now,
> on trying to make the world
> different than it is.
> Sing. Pray. Touch only those
> to whom you commit your life.
> Centre down.
>
> And when your body has become still,
> reach out with your heart.
> Know that we are connected
> in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.
> (You could hardly deny it now.)
> Know that our lives
> are in one another's hands.
> (Surely, that has come clear.)
> Do not reach out your hands.
> Reach out your heart.

[23] NT Wright – 'Kingdom come: The public meaning of the Gospels' | (jasongoroncy.com)

Reach out your words.
Reach out all the tendrils
of compassion that move, invisibly,
where we cannot touch.

Promise this world your love–
for better or for worse,
in sickness and in health,
so long as we all shall live.[24]

Jesus Teaching his disciples on the Mount of Olives during Holy Week
James Tissot (1836-1902)
Brooklyn Museum

The Gentiles Ask to See Jesus
James Tissot (1836-1902)
Brooklyn Museum

[24] Journey with Jesus - Pandemic

HOLY WEDNESDAY – 31 March 2021

Readings: Isaiah 50.4-9a, Psalm 70, Hebrews 12.1-3 & John 13.21-32.

EACH MAN KILLS THE THING HE LOVES

Egeria, our guide to 4th century Holy Week practices in Jerusalem, tells us that, on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Holy Week, a similar pattern is followed each day:

> At the ninth hour [that is, about 3pm] all gather in the major church, that is, the Martyrium [the basilica], and there until the first hour of the night [about 7pm] hymns and antiphons are continually recited, readings also appropriate to the day and place are read, prayers always interspersed.

On Wednesday, however, after vespers, everyone moved to the Holy Sepulchre, called by Egeria the "Anastasis", which means "resurrection". What Egeria is telling us is that this is not so much the place where Jesus was buried as the place from which he rose. This is an interesting name because, although we in the West call the church that of the "Holy Sepulchre", the Orthodox call it the "Church of the Resurrection". This may lead us to think about the western emphasis on the sacrificial death in contrast to the victorious resurrection. Have we concentrated too much on sin and death and too little on acceptance and new life? Once at the sepulchre, Egeria says that

> … a presbyter stands outside the enclosure and takes the gospel and reads that passage where Judas Iscariot went to the Jews and determined what they should give him to betray the Lord. When that passage has been read, there is such a groaning and moaning from all the people that there is no one who could not be moved to tears at that time. Afterward prayer is made, the catechumens are blessed, afterward the faithful, and the dismissal is done.

The gospel reading referred to is Matthew 26:14-16. So, also, this evening, our gospel refers to Judas, this time at the Last Supper, although his indirect naming is not picked up by all present.

What are we to make of Judas? We have already seen Judas in action at the dinner in Bethany. Mark's gospel also recounts that meal and says:

> Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give him money. So he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.[26]

The significant word is "then". Mark makes a clear link between the dinner with its anointing and Judas's actions. It can't be the extravagant action of Mary, even though it was subject to some criticism. It was hardly Jesus' fault that Mary did what she did. He

[26] Mark 14:10-11

might have objected, but he could hardly have stopped her unless he knew in advance, of which we have no evidence. Something happened that made Judas betray Jesus, rather than rebuking Mary, which, in any case, he did.

That trigger may have been the reference that Jesus made to his impending death. Although the disciples were notoriously blind to the kind of Messiahship that Jesus was proclaiming, there can be no doubt that they believed him to be the Messiah. Dying was not one of the prospects for a genuine Jewish Messiah. On the contrary, the Messiah was to live forever.

Is it possible that, at this point, Judas realised that Jesus was an imposter? However charismatic he might have been in his person, however valuable his general teachings were, Jesus was not the Messiah? His delusion that he was the Messiah was, then, blasphemous and politically dangerous. Judas would have been aware that these charges had already been laid against Jesus. Did he now believe that they were true?

So, he goes to the authorities. What could he offer them? First, he could confirm, from the inside, what Jesus was teaching his disciples and, second, he could show them when and how to arrest Jesus in relative private manner and without raising a public outcry. His information brought him 30 pieces of silver.

Was it worth it? It's hard to know which silver coins were used to pay Judas. Many different silver coins circulated in the Palestine of Jesus' day and they were of varying purity. In today's value, the 30 pieces could have been worth between $275 and $400. You can judge for yourselves whether the price was fair. In retrospect, Judas thought the price both too much and too little. He tried to return the money.

As you will be aware, Judas had a surname, Iscariot. This word is usually interpreted as meaning from the town of Kerioth, which was located about 40km south of Jerusalem and 130km as the crow flies from Galilee, closer to 200km by road. Jesus and his other disciples were all from Galilee. Did Judas, aware that he was an outsider, never feel at home amongst the apostles? Was his betrayal an act of retribution?

If we were to take a kindlier view of Judas, we might speculate that he was trying to bring things to a head. If Jesus were to be threatened with arrest and trial, would he activate the traditional role of the Messiah? Would he raise up his followers in an insurrection? We don't know whether Judas thought these things. For him to do so, he would have needed some confidence that Jesus could take such action when pressed. All the available evidence shows that this was an unlikely outcome. Still, was Judas hopeful of securing his preferred outcome?

If Judas really loved Jesus, we might bring to mind the words of Oscar Wilde in his ballad of Reading Gaol", in which he says:

Yet each man kills the thing he loves
By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword!

In reality, we don't know why Judas acted as he did. What we do know is what actually happened. Judas went to the authorities, made arrangements with them and was paid for his information.

As pilgrims in Jerusalem, what have we discovered? With Egeria we have heard of another kind of humanity. We may, with her and her fellow 4th century worshippers, be moved by what Judas did and what his actions caused to happen. But we are not seeing an alien, an entirely other; we are not seeing an agent of unspeakable inhumanity; we are seeing one of us. We are seeing someone who does not always know themself. We are seeing someone who can make serious, indeed disastrous, errors of judgement. Above all, we are seeing someone whom Jesus loves.

Jesus had found out what Judas had done. His networks in the establishment must have been good. In our gospel reading, Jesus tells Judas to go about his plan. Jesus did not try to persuade him not to go. Neither did he denounce him before his colleagues, who might well have tried to stop Judas, even with violence. It was clearly his intention that Judas should act as he did. Judas was the last move in the fulfilment of the plan that Jesus was following in the week.

But what did Jesus think about Judas? English poet, Ruth Etchells has explored that possibility in her "Ballad of the Judas Tree":

In Hell there grew a Judas Tree
Where Judas hanged and died
Because he could not bear to see
His master crucified

Our Lord descended into Hell
And found his Judas there
For ever hanging on the tree
Grown from his own despair

So Jesus cut his Judas down
And took him in his arms
'It was for this I came' he said
'And not to do you harm

My Father gave me twelve good men
And all of them I kept
Though one betrayed and one denied
Some fled and others slept

In three days' time I must return
To make the others glad
But first I had to come to Hell
And share the death you had

My tree will grow in place of yours
Its roots lie here as well
There is no final victory
Without this soul from Hell '

So when we all condemn him
As of every traitor worst
Remember that of all his men
Our Lord forgave him first.[27]

The Last Supper: Judas Dipping his Hand in the Dish
James Tissot (1836-1902)
Brooklyn Museum

Judas Leaves the Cenacle
(the room where the Last Supper was held)
James Tissot (1836-1902)
Brooklyn Museum

[27] Ruth Etchells (1931-2012) was one of the most influential women in the Church of England, a university lecturer, poet and "the best female bishop we never had". She had a rare compassion, intensity and visionary quality balanced by a self-deprecating wit. And a depth of intuition which made her a good spiritual director and chaplain. From the obituary in The Guardian dated 27 Aug 2012. Microsoft Word - The Ballad of the Judas Tree by Ruth Etchells.docx (wordpress.com)

MAUNDY THURSDAY – 1 April 2021

Readings: Exodus 12.1-4, 11-14, Psalm 116.1-2, 11-18,
1 Corinthians 11.23-26 & John 13.1-17, 31b-35.

On Being a Servant

Egeria, our guide to 4th century Holy Week practices in Jerusalem, tells us that, on Thursday, everything changes.

> Then on the fifth day of the week they do those things that are customary … . At the eighth hour [about 2pm] all the people gather at the Martyrium [the basilica] according to custom, but earlier than on other days because it is necessary for the dismissal to be done sooner. Thus, when all the people have gathered, they do what is to be done; that day the oblation [that is, the eucharist] is made at the Martyrium and the dismissal is done there about the tenth hour [about 4pm]. But before the dismissal is done, the archdeacon raises his voice and says, "At the first hour of the night let us all come together at the church that is on Eleona, [where the Palm Sunday procession had begun] because the greatest labour awaits us today, this very night."
>
> So the dismissal also having been done …, they go to the Anastasis [the Holy Sepulchre], prayer is made, the catechumens are blessed according to the custom and then the faithful, and the dismissal is done. And then everyone hurries to return to their home to eat, because as soon as they have eaten, they all go to Eleona, to the church in which there is the cave in which on this day the Lord was with the apostles.

This is where the vigil begins. It goes through the night until the morning of Good Friday.

It is clear that the Jerusalem church did not attempt, as we do, to replicate all the events of Maundy Thursday. Unlike the first three days of the week, however, when the evening worship was a service of the word, vespers, on Thursday evening the Eucharist was celebrated, no doubt to mark the occasion of its institution. Foot washing was not part of that service.

Nevertheless, foot washing was practised in Egeria's time, but as part of the baptismal rite. The catechumens were baptised before the Easter Day Eucharist. When they came up out of the water, the bishop would wash their feet. Tertullian, Origen, St Ambrose and St Augustine all testify to the practice. As far as I can tell, foot washing did not appear in the Mandy Thursday liturgy until the 7th century, and then not universally. In the Sarum rite that was used in England until the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer,* the clergy held a service of foot washing in the cathedral chapter house after the evening Eucharist on Maundy

Thursday, returning to the cathedral for Compline.[29] With the new prayer book, foot washing fell out of use, to be restored in the liturgical renewal of the mid-20th century.

As we celebrate the same occasion as Egeria, we first need to note how John sets up his account of the foot washing. Jesus was aware that the end had come. He had fulfilled his mission and "was going to the Father". He knew that Judas was to betray him. His washing of his disciples' feet was not, therefore, just another lived parable, it was a vital demonstration of who and what he was.

Foot washing was not an unusual act. In a country with bad roads and little rainfall, sandal-clad guests are bound to be dusty. As a matter of courtesy, they must be offered the opportunity to refresh themselves and, in particular, to wash their feet. If Jesus is the host at this meal, it is his duty to ensure that this courtesy is done. Indeed, he himself had once reprimanded one of his hosts for failing to offer it.[30] Although it is necessary that it be done, the doing of it is a menial act. In any substantial household, the servants would be ready to perform it.

Jesus, however, takes the towel and washes the disciples' feet himself. If it was surprising that Jesus rode into the city on a donkey, it was the more surprising that he took the towel in this way. If we needed a warning that this was to be a night of reversals, we need look no further. Typically, Peter's reaction went from one extreme to another. At first, he refused to participate, just as some of us might feel embarrassed at the ceremony when we first took part. Then he requested more washing than Jesus was offering, not his feet only, but his head and hands too. Perhaps he dimly grasped the meaning of this kind of servant leadership and realised that it would take more than a foot wash to achieve it for himself.[31]

Although John does not say so, we must assume that Jesus washed the feet of Judas, just as he did to the other disciples. Judas did not leave until later in the meal, so Jesus served not only those who might be seen as loyal, but also his betrayer. In this, he was truly a servant. In a household with servants, the opinion of the foot washer about the master's guests is of no consequence.

Even though performed by a servant, foot washing is a strangely intimate act. As Tom Wright says of the first time that he took part in the act:

> … nothing could have prepared me for the sense of holy intimacy that went with the simple but profound action of washing other people's feet. Feet are very basic things: not pretty, not ugly, just basic. Down to earth, you might say. Washing them is both very mundane (we all have to wash our feet, and we do it so regularly we

[29] Aspicientes in Jesum: Sarum Maundy Thursday (valleadurni.blogspot.com)
[30] Luke 7:44
[31] Brian Grenier, *St John's Gospel: A Self Directed Retreat*, Homebush, St Paul Publications, 1991. p. 194

> hardly think about it) and very close and personal. Washing between someone else's toes is an intimate action. It is a moment of tenderness.[32]

This act takes us back to the scene in Bethany, to Mary and her ointment and the feet of Jesus. It has the same intimacy, affection, humanity and vulnerability.

Jesus' actions might have had some shock value but, when we look back at them, we should not be surprised that, being the Son of God, Jesus acted in this apparently uncharacteristic way. On the contrary, Jesus acted in this way precisely because he was the Son of God. That was the surprise. It took the disciples some time to understand this and, I suspect, it also takes us some time.

Then follows the Last Supper. Here we see again the organisation behind the events of Holy Week. A room had to be found and paid for. The food had to be bought, possibly a whole lamb, and prepared. It is probable that more than the twelve apostles were there. We know that Jesus travelled in company. All of them would need to keep Passover and none had anywhere to go if they were not with Jesus. Were Mary, Martha and Lazarus there, or back home in Bethany? Where was Jesus' mother, Mary? We know that she, and other women, were at the crucifixion the next day. How could they be omitted?

More importantly, the meal that was about to happen was, according to Jesus' plan, to be the unifying focus of his continuing community. The twelve were to be the leaders of that community and took central place. But where better to institute the Eucharist than in the midst of the new community with its diversity of members, women, men and even young people?

When we celebrate the Eucharist, we use the words of Jesus as reported by Paul. He was not present that night but his knowledge shows how central those words were to the fabric of the young church. Jesus, present at the original event assures us that he is present at every future event. That is why his presence is real. We need no theory to explain how that might be. What we need is the assurance that comes from our servant Lord and the host at this meal.

Then Judas left and, as John tells us, "it was night".[33]

After the meal, the disciples went with Jesus to the Garden of Gethsemane where Judas executed his plan to have Jesus arrested without exciting a large crowd. If it was night when Judas left, it was darker night when his disciples fled.

As pilgrims in Jerusalem, what have we discovered? We have discovered the nature of the servant Son of God but we have not yet discovered the full extent of that servanthood. We have discovered that he is always with us, but we have not yet discovered what that presence might mean.

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[32] N T Wright, *John for Everyone Part 2: Chapters 11-21*, London. SPCK, p. 42
[33] John 13:30

Carol Penner - *Coming to a City Near You*

Jesus comes to Jerusalem, the city nearest you.
Jesus comes to the gate, to the synagogue,
to houses prepared for wedding parties,
to the pools where people wait to be healed,
to the temple where lambs are sold,
to gardens, beautiful in the moonlight.
He comes to the governor's palace.

Jesus comes to Jerusalem, the city nearest you,
to new subdivisions and trailer parks,
to penthouses and basement apartments,
to the factory, the hospital and the Cineplex,
to the big box outlet centre and to churches,
with the same old same old message,
unchanged from the beginning of time.

Jesus comes to Jerusalem, the city nearest you
with his Good News and…
Hope erupts! Joy springs forth!
The very stones cry out,
"Hosanna in the highest,
blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"
The crowds jostle and push,
they can't get close enough!
People running alongside flinging down their coats before him!
Jesus, the parade marshal, waving, smiling.
The paparazzi elbow for room,
looking for that perfect picture for the headline,
"The Man Who Would Be King".

Jesus comes to Jerusalem, the city nearest you
and gets the red carpet treatment.
Children waving real palm branches from the florist,
silk palm branches from [Kmart] ~~Walmart~~,
palms made from green construction paper.
Hosannas ringing in churches, chapels, cathedrals,
in monasteries, basilicas and tent-meetings.
King Jesus, honoured in a thousand hymns
in Canada, Cameroon, Calcutta and Canberra.
We LOVE this great big powerful capital K King Jesus
coming in glory and splendour and majesty
and awe and power and might.

Jesus comes to Jerusalem, the city nearest you.
Kingly, he takes a towel and washes feet.
With majesty, he serves bread and wine.
With honour, he prays all night.
With power, he puts on chains.
Jesus, King of all creation, appears in state
in the eyes of the prisoner, the AIDS orphan, the crack addict,
asking for one cup of cold water,
one coat shared with someone who has none,
one heart, yours,
and a second mile.
Jesus comes to Jerusalem, the city nearest you.
Can you see him?[34]

Christ Washing his Disciples' Feet (1575-1580)
Tintoretto (1518-1598)
National Gallery, London

You Could Not Watch One Hour With Me
James Tissot (1836-1902)
Brooklyn Museum

[34] Journey with Jesus - Coming to a City Near You

GOOD FRIDAY – 2 April 2021

Readings: Isaiah 50.4-10, John 6.35-40, Isaiah 52.13 – 53.12 Psalm 22. 1-11, 14, 18-20, Hebrews 10.16-25, 1 Corinthians 1.18-31 & John 18.1 – 19.42.

When the Innocent Dies

Egeria, our guide to 4th century Holy Week practices in Jerusalem, tells us that, on Thursday night, the people keep vigil on the Mount of Olives until "the cocks begin to crow". Then they proceed down the mountain.

> So, when they have arrived at Gethsemane, first an appropriate prayer is made, then a hymn is recited; then is read that passage from the gospel where the Lord was arrested. When that passage has been read, there is such a groaning and moaning from all the people, with weeping, that the lamentation of all the people is heard about as far away as the city. And from that hour they go to the city on foot with hymns; they arrive at the gate at that time when one person begins to recognize another; …
>
> When they have arrived [at the church], the daylight is already beginning to be bright. Then is read there that passage from the gospel where the Lord is brought before Pontius Pilate, and everything that is written that Pilate said to the Lord and to the Jews is read in full.

The bishop then sends everyone home for breakfast, to return at about 8am. On their way home, however, they go to another church in the city to pray at the pillar on which Jesus was scourged. This is possibly the beginning of the Way of the Cross that developed in the medieval period. When they return,

> … a chair is placed for the bishop on Golgotha behind the Cross, … a table covered with a linen cloth is placed before him; the deacons stand around the table and a silver-gilt casket is brought, in which is the holy wood of the cross; it is opened and [the wood] is brought out … [and] placed on the table.
>
> So, when it has been placed on the table, the bishop, sitting, grips the ends of the holy wood with his hands, and the deacons who stand around guard it. It is guarded thus because the custom is that all the people coming one by one, both the faithful and the catechumens, bowing at the table, kiss the holy wood and pass through. And because, I don't know when, someone is said to have bitten off and stolen a piece of the holy wood, therefore it is now thus guarded by the deacons who stand around lest anyone dares to come and do so again.
>
> … from the sixth to the ninth hour [midday to 3pm] nothing else is done except that readings are read … to show all the people that whatever the prophets foretold concerning the Lord's passion is shown to have been done both from the gospels and also from the writings of the Apostles. And so during those three hours all the

> people are taught that nothing had been done that had not been foretold, and nothing had been told that had not been completely fulfilled.

The three-hour service concluded with the reading of John's account of the Passion. Because the tomb was also in the church, a brief liturgy commemorating the burial of Jesus ended the day. Thus, the pattern of our own Good Friday liturgies had already been set. Egeria's pilgrimage, and ours, has reached a high point.

As T S Eliot says in his poem, *Little Gidding*, this is "the intersection of the timeless moment";[36] we have come to a timeless place. We have come not to engage in active pursuits, but to respond to an event of cosmic significance; to stand in awe. This is the place that is specific to us here and now, and yet universal, available to everyone everywhere; here is the event, bound by time, present to us now, and present for all time. Here we come to face ourselves in the crucified Christ.

As we seek to understand what we are celebrating, we should hear the voices of the women. Women were the most constant companions of Jesus. They appear frequently in the gospel narratives and must have been present even when they are not mentioned. All the gospel accounts of the crucifixion mention the presence of the women, naming some of them. Of the men, only the "one whom he loved" is recorded as being there. All the rest seem to have melted away. In a world of violence and discrimination, women still stand weeping at the foot of the cross. They appear nightly on our television screens, the ever-present testifiers to violence, terrorism, war and loss. And it may be this kind of experience that made the women with Jesus more acutely aware of who and what he was.

Clearly Jesus was to die. The authorities had decided upon it and manipulated Pilate into agreeing. Jesus was not principally a religious threat. The Judaism of the time had a number of sects that presented their own way of interpreting the faith. The Pharisees and Sadducees were sects, as were the quasi-monastic Essenes.[37] John the Baptist created a sect, which still exists,[38] as Jesus could have done. But the problem with Jesus was political. The religious authorities walked a fine line with their Roman occupiers. They had negotiated some autonomy that would survive only if everything remained quiet. The last thing they needed was a potential Messiah who would claim to be king. They primed their followers to call for Jesus' death and the spectre of civil disturbance added to the pressure on Pilate.

But why crucifixion? This form of death was not culturally part of the Jewish legal system. It was a particularly Roman form of punishment, reserved for oppressing the empire's subject peoples. Although most executions in history have been public events, this method

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[36] T S Eliot, 'Little Gidding', in Helen Gardner (ed.), *The Faber Book of Religious Verse*, London, Faber & Faber, 1972, pp. 319-320. Four Quartets - 4 Little Gidding (davidgorman.com)
[37] Essenes - Wikipedia
[38] Mandaeans - Wikipedia

was more than a demonstration of the formal power of the law. It was an instrument of terror.

It took a long time, often days, before a person died. The prisoner was first flogged to reduce strength. He was crucified naked as an additional form of public humiliation. The final cause of death was asphyxiation brought about by the tightening of the chest muscles as the victim hung by his outstretched arms. Indeed, death finally came as the victim could no longer support himself on his legs and relieve the pressure on his chest. This is why the legs of the two thieves crucified with Jesus were broken to hasten their deaths. This is how we recognise Jesus as a political threat.

Mark Heim comments that Good Friday presents us with competing views about the "redemptive value of violence".[39] The authorities needed the violent death of Jesus to save the nation. For them, it was necessary that Jesus be seen to be guilty, to be universally condemned, and to unite the people by his death. Heim warns us against incorporating that view into our own approach to Good Friday; to continue to espouse the sacrificial system as practiced religiously by the Temple and politically by the establishment.

Jesus had anticipated his death and had a view about the redemptive nature of his suffering. But it was not the same view as that espoused by the authorities. Jesus had no imperial ambitions. His kingdom was, as we have seen, not of that kind. Jesus was innocent of the charges against him and it is important for us that we see that clearly.

Andrew Marr, Abbot of St Gregory's Abbey in Minnesota, reminds us that the whole of the arrest, trial, crucifixion and death of Jesus was done by humans. Jesus chose to be in Jerusalem; the authorities chose to kill him; Pilate chose to order his execution, which was carried out by soldiers who did as they were told. "In all this, God does nothing." Nothing in the gospel narratives suggests differently.[40] James Alison comments that "in the New Testament, God is entirely set free from participation in our violence". God does not expel us, we expel God. And because God allows that expulsion, we learn what God is really like.[41]

The responsibility for the death of Jesus lies squarely at the feet of humans, initially those directly involved. They, however, are simply the instruments of all humanity. "To lay the blame on the Pharisees or the Jews is to undermine the universal meaning of the crucifixion in favour of the familiar finger-pointing theory of human wickedness."[42] This continues the way of retaliatory violence. Any blame for the death of Jesus belongs to all of us.

Does the death of Jesus bring our pilgrimage to an end? If this pilgrimage is at an end, what kind of end is it? Since the authorities had their way with him, we could easily see it

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[39] S Mark Heim, *saved from Sacrifice: a theology of the cross*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2006, pp. 124-128
[40] What Humans Willed: the Passion Story | Imaginary Visions of True Peace (andrewmarrosb.blog)
[41] Girard's breakthrough – James Alison
[42] Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads*, New York, Crossroad Publishing Co, 2002, 1996, pp. 218-219

as a defeat. We could see it as the terminus of our journey, the end, nothing beyond. It would be time now to go home. The contrary is true, says Richard Holloway.

> The death of Jesus was a victory, then. But it was not just the triumph of endurance, the victory of courage over pain, though it was certainly that. Something fundamental was altered in the way things are in the universe. A decisive encounter in the struggle against the power of evil was concluded. Somewhere a great wall was breached, a stronghold thrown down, a prison door flung open. … poetry and metaphor are inescapable because the decisiveness of the event seems to be beyond the reach of ordinary discourse.[43]

As pilgrims in Jerusalem, what have we discovered? We have continued to find the depths of humanity; in the agonised prayers in the garden, in the dignity of the suffering servant. We have also discovered the darker side of humanity in the betrayal by Judas and in the ferocity of a frightened and insecure political establishment; the religious authorities walking their fine line and the Roman procurator fearing for his own political career should there be any civil disturbance. In the end, as always, we have looked again in the mirror to wonder who it is who is looking back at us.

Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,
Which was my sin, though it were done before?
Wilt thou forgive that sin, through which I run,
And do still run: though still I do deplore?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For, I have more.

Wilt thou forgive that sin which I have won
Others to sin? and, made my sin their door?
Wilt thou forgive that sin which I did shun
A year or two: but wallowed in a score?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For, I have more.

I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun
My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;
But swear by thyself, that at my death thy son
Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;
And, having done that, thou hast done,
I fear no more.[44]

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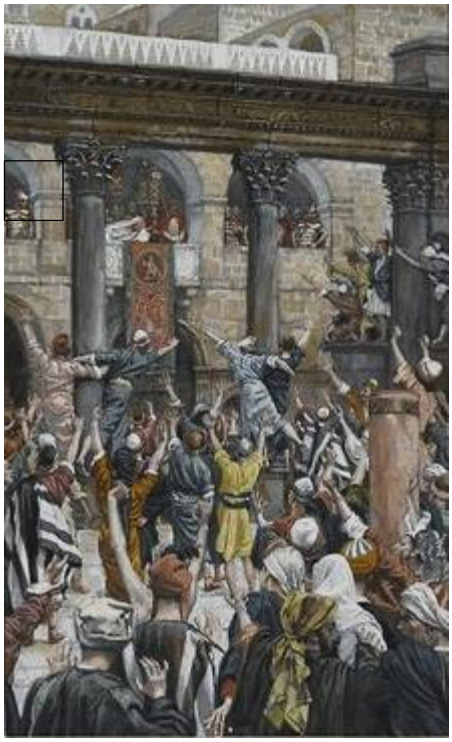
[43] Richard Holloway, *The Way of the Cross*, London, Collins, 1986, p. 94

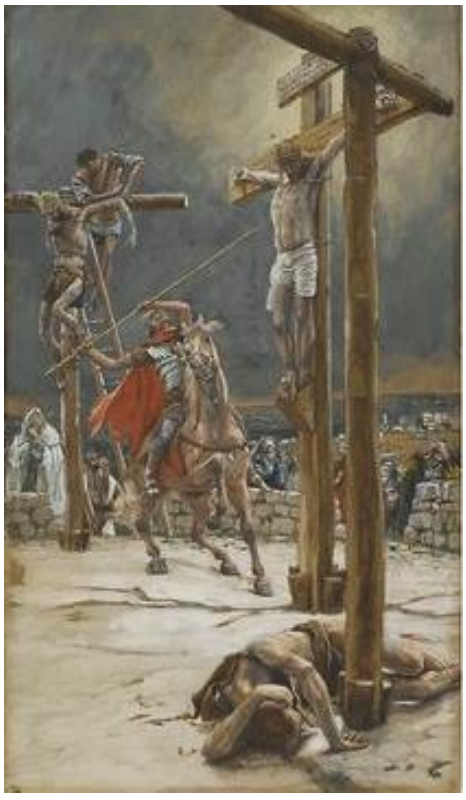
[44] John Donne, 'A Hymn to God the Father', in A J Smith (ed.), *John Donne: the Complete English Poems*, Penguin, 1971, pp. 348-9. A Hymn to God the Father by John Donne | Poetry Foundation



Crucify Him
James Tissot (1836-1902)
Brooklyn Museum

The Four Guards Sat Down and Watched Him
James Tissot (1836-1902)
Brooklyn Museum

What Our Lord Saw from the Cross
James Tissot (1836-1902)
Brooklyn Museum



The Strike of the Lance
James Tissot (1836-1902)
Brooklyn Museum

It is Finished
James Tissot (1836-1902)
Brooklyn Museum

EASTER VIGIL – 4 April 2021

Readings: Genesis 22.1-18, Exodus 14.10-31; 15.20-21a, Zephaniah 3.14-20, Romans 6.3-11 & Matthew 28.1-10.

From Darkness to Light

Egeria, our guide to 4th century Holy Week practices in Jerusalem, is strangely silent about Easter Day, because, she says:

> The paschal vigil is done in the same way as with us; but this alone is different, that the "infants," [the newly baptised] when they have been baptized and clothed, as they come out of the font, are first led along with the bishop to the Anastasis [the Holy Sepulchre]. The bishop goes inside the enclosure of the Anastasis, one hymn is recited, and the bishop makes a prayer for them, and then he comes to the major church with them, where according to the custom all the people are keeping vigil. They do there what is also customary with us, and after the oblation [Eucharist] has been made, the dismissal is done.

What was the liturgy familiar to Egeria? Both the ceremony in her home church and the one in Jerusalem probably included an *Exultet*, as we still do. Although a relatively standard text did not appear until the 8th century,[46] it was, in Egeria's time, the custom for each deacon to write his own *Exultet*, often using traditional material. Part of that tradition was a reference to bees as the source of the wax for the Paschal candle. St Jerome, in about 384, the date of Egeria's travels, expressed in a letter his dislike of including in the

[46] Exultet | Grove Music (oxfordmusiconline.com)

Exultet any reference to bees, such as we have heard in our version this morning.[47] He refused to help his correspondent, an Italian deacon called Praetorius, to compose his *Exultet.* Jerome may have been a grumpy old man but his comments suggest that contemporary practice, both in Jerusalem and in Egeria's home church, included an *Exultet* and a Paschal candle. Whether or not we have any catechumens to baptise, we recognise the importance of baptism and renew our vows at this service.

We know that the readings at Egeria's Easter Vigil included the ones from Genesis, Exodus and Matthew that we have read this morning. In another place, Egeria describes a ceremony of lighting candles and lamps in the church:

> all the lamps and candles are lit, and the light is immense. The light is not brought from outside but is taken from inside the cave, that is, from inside the enclosure, where a lamp is always burning night and day.

Scholars suggest that this practice originated at the Easter Vigil in providing the light for the Paschal candle. It is a ceremony of light emerging from an empty tomb. It is the light of our new fire brought by us into a dark church and gradually illuminating the space as it moves from person to person, eventually encompassing us all.

Each of us can remember quite clearly the experience of significant events. Those of us who are old enough can remember exactly when we heard of the assassination of US President John F Kennedy, or the death of Princess Diana. I can remember my first experience of the Easter Vigil in this church. As we entered, the incense filled the space, illuminated only by the Paschal candle. This became a place of great mystery, almost eerie, as the light, carried by the smoke, gradually increased.

As an account of my experience, what I have said is as exact as I can make it. As an analogy for the actual Easter morning, it is hopelessly inadequate. There was nothing gradual about the experience of the women who went to the tomb that morning. For them, the event was sudden and overwhelming. Matthew describes earthquake and an angel rendering the guards into unconsciousness. As well he might, the angel acknowledged the women's fears.

As Tom Wright notes, the God who was "silent on Good Friday, is having the last word"[48] The gospel records of this event have some distinct features. Unlike other events in the life of Jesus, none of the gospels directly relate the resurrection to Old Testament prophecy. Neither do they promise eternal life as a result of the event. The figure of Jesus

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[47] The Exsultet: the proclamation of Easter — St Mary Magdalen School of Theology (theschooloftheology.org) St. Jerome was puzzled and disturbed by the way the bees invaded the Easter service of the church. "Nothing is harder," he commented in A.D. 384, than to explain why at Easter the Christian congregation must be regaled by bee stories. It is all right for pagan poets to romance about the creatures, he says, "but what has it to do with the deacon, the sacraments of the church, the Easter time, when the Bishop sits silent while the priests carry on a sort of sideshow with the common people, talking to them about the bee?" What is it all about, he asks—you won't find a hint of it in the Old Testament or the New—no mention of bees, or honey, or wax—where does it all come from? Symbolism of the Bee: "The Deseret Connection" by Hugh W. Nibley « oneClimbs.com

[48] Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 2*, London, SPCK, 2002, p. 197

has none of the characteristics of the Transfiguration. He does not shine or glow; when they see him, he seems quite normal, not otherworldly. Repeating their prominence at the crucifixion, the women are the first witnesses, despite the then prevalent view that the testimony of women was not to be trusted.[49] All this points to a new beginning. As Wright says:

> … what God is doing is not just an extraordinary miracle, a display of supernatural power for its own sake, or a special favour to Jesus.
>
> … the crucial thing is that Jesus' resurrection is not about proving some point, or offering people a new spiritual experience. It is about God's purpose that must now be fulfilled. They must see Jesus, but that seeing will be a commissioning, a commissioning to a new work, a new life, a new way of life in which everything he told them before will start to come true.[50]

This is symbolised for us in the blessing of the Paschal candle. The presider of the Eucharist traces the items engraved into the candle. Central is the cross, the event that has brought us to this hour.

Above and below are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, "Alpha" and "Omega", symbolising that this occasion is both an end and a beginning. It is the end of the journey that Jesus began in Galilee, it is the beginning of our new life. As the opening verse of John's gospel reminds us, the Word was "in the beginning". As Revelation reminds us, that Word is also at the end.[51]

Despite the cosmic nature of what we celebrate, we also mark the year because we have the responsibility of the Christian life here and now. Finally, five grains of incense, contained in the heads of five studs or nails, bring us back to the cross and the five wounds that Jesus bore. In effect, we go backwards and forwards, always circling around specific events in time and the cosmic significance of what we have heard and experienced.[52]

Since, also we have been following Egeria in Jerusalem and find ourselves, with her, at the Easter Vigil; since those events we celebrate took place in a Jerusalem destroyed in 70AD, and Egeria experienced them in a rebuilt city; and since we celebrate everything being made new, we should turn to the New Testament's final vision, the New Jerusalem. In Revelation the author describes a new city with no temple and gates that never close.[53]

It would be a mistake for us to think that the new Jerusalem is a far-off vision. The challenge of the resurrection is that the work of that city started right then and starts right now. If there is no temple, there can no longer be any sacrifices. The only sacrifice that matters has already been offered. If there is no temple, there is no special place in which

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[49] N T Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2003, pp. 599-608
[50] Wright, *Matthew Pt. 2*, pp-197-198
[51] Revelation 2:8
[52] Vincent Sherlock, *Celebrating Holy Week*, Dublin, Messenger Publication, 2019
[53] Revelation 211-4, 22-26

to find God. God dwells with and in us. Most importantly, the gates of this city never close. In ancient times, cities closed their gates at nightfall to prevent enemies sneaking in under the cover of darkness. In this city there is no night and no need to fear anyone who enters.

Unfortunately, we, the church, have spent much time in trying to close the gates and prevent particular persons and groups from entering. The identities of those groups have changed over time. Ethnicity, race, religion and sexuality have all had a turn, as they still do.

The death of Jesus was the result of an attempt to preserve peace and order through the judicious use of violence. The religious authorities, Annas and Caiaphas, the Roman governor, Pilate, and their respective minions, could all justify what they had done as necessary, yet regrettable, violence. It had to be done and they would do it again. As Caiaphas said:

> '… it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.'[54]

This is the argument that justified killing the Son of God and we know that it is the argument that we still use. If the resurrection contains any element of victory, it reverses this assumption. If Jesus triumphs over death, he triumphs over the ethic of violence as a solution to human problems.

Rowan Williams identifies the resurrection as "an invitation to *recognise one's victim as one's hope*".[55] The crucified victim is the one that God has chosen. God is to be found in the company of that victim. Williams points out that this is no abstract proposition. The victim is the victim of the hearers of the Easter message. "We are, insistently and relentlessly, in Jerusalem, confronted … with a victim who is *our* victim", a victim we recreate whenever we engage in the oppression or diminution of others. That is, our failure to recognise and accept our new life contributes to our continual creation of victims whom we proceed to destroy.

The resurrection that we celebrate this day is truly an invitation to an entirely new form of life. The need for victims has gone. That one victim has become our life-changing hope.

As pilgrims in Jerusalem, what have we discovered? We have attended the same liturgies, heard the same readings and considered the same events. Nevertheless, each of us will take away something different. After a week in which we together saw humanity in its nobility and in its degradation, in its confidence and in its fears, in its propensity for both good and evil, in its strengths and in its weaknesses, we have come full circle. At the beginning of his gospel, Matthew quoted Isaiah:

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[54] John 11:50 (NRSV)
[55] Williams, *Resurrection*, p. 11

> ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
> and they shall name him Emmanuel’, which means, ‘God is with us.’[56]

That is what we have discovered: God is with us.

In 1595, Edmund Spenser published this sonnet:

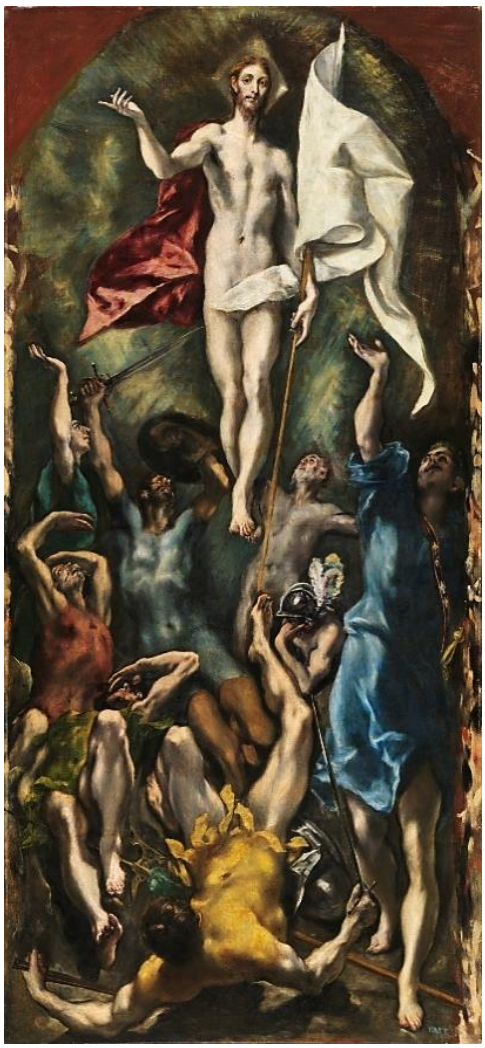
> Most glorious Lord of life, that on this day,
> Didst make thy triumph over death and sin:
> And having harrow'd hell, didst bring away
> Captivity thence captive, us to win:
> This joyous day, dear Lord, with joy begin,
> And grant that we for whom thou diddest die,
> Being with thy dear blood clean wash'd from sin,
> May live for ever in felicity.
> And that thy love we weighing worthily,
> May likewise love thee for the same again:
> And for thy sake, that all like dear didst buy,
> With love may one another entertain.
> So let us love, dear love, like as we ought,
> Love is the lesson which the Lord us taught.[57]

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Christ is risen! Alleluia!

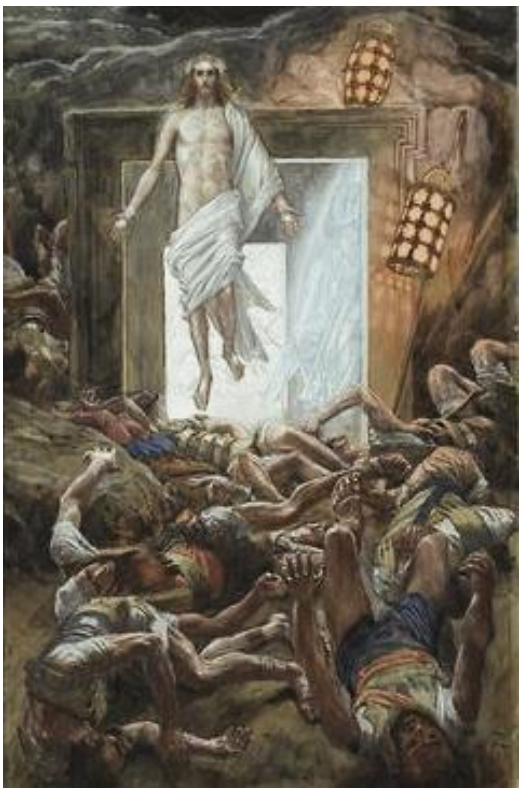
Anastasis (14th century?)
Chora Church, Istanbul

The Chi Rho with a wreath symbolizing the victory of the Resurrection, above Roman soldiers (c. 350)
Sarcophagus of Domatilla, Vatican Museum
Paleo-Christian "Sarcophagus of Domatilla" (christianiconography.info)

[56] Matthew 1:23
[57] Edmund Spenser (1552–1599) *Most Glorious Lord of Life Amoretti LXVIII* Journey with Jesus - Previous Essays and Reviews



The Resurrection (1584-1594)
El Greco
Prado Museum, Madrid



The Resurrection
James Tissot (1836-1902)
Brooklyn Museum

Mary Magdalene and the Holy Women
at the Tomb
James Tissot (1836-1902)
Brooklyn Museum

EASTER DAY – 4 April 2021

Readings: Acts 10.34-43, Hymn to the risen Christ, 1 Corinthians 15.1-11 & John.1-18

Recognising Jesus

Egeria, our guide to 4th century Holy Week practices in Jerusalem, describes two celebrations of the Eucharist on Easter Day. The first is at the vigil, corresponding to our earlier service this morning. The second follows shortly thereafter and takes place, not in the major church, but close to the tomb.

> And after the dismissal from the vigil in the major church has been done, they immediately come with hymns to the Anastasis [the Holy Sepulchre] and there that passage of the gospel about the resurrection is then read, prayer is made, and then the bishop makes the oblation [Eucharist] there; but all is done quickly on account of the people, in order that they are not delayed longer, and so the people are dismissed.

As far as I can tell, the gospel used at this second eucharist was the one we have just heard from John's gospel. From this we may deduce that the Jerusalem church did not offer its people any choice between a vigil or a later Eucharist. The same people went to both. The second Eucharist was done quickly because the people had been up all night and needed to go home to rest. When, in the Western tradition, the Easter Vigil began to be celebrated after sunset on Holy Saturday, the way was opened for additional services after dawn on Easter Day.

In a sermon on Easter Day in 2005, theologian James Alison suggested that it is easier for us to celebrate Good Friday than today.[59] Good Friday conforms to our style of story-telling; it has a clear end, Jesus dies. We can tell who are the goodies and who are the baddies. "There are just rewards and not-so-just rewards". The story may end in unjustifiable tragedy but it does end. From Easter Day onwards, the story might have a beginning, but it has no end. Everything about our style of story-telling, which is actually our style of living, is upended.

Later in his sermon, Alison comments on how Mary Magdalen, Peter and the other disciple had all looked into the empty tomb and had become confused. John says that Peter looked into the tomb and believed; not that Jesus was risen but that Mary had told the truth when she said the tomb was empty. They both go away, leaving Mary alone. Both Alison and Tom Wright link the story of the risen Jesus and Mary to the account of creation. Jesus speaks to Mary, not from the tomb but from behind her. Who is speaking to her, she wonders? In the creation myth, both God and Adam walked in the garden. Which of them is speaking? Between the two of them, Mary chooses Adam, the gardener. Much safer

[59] Staggered Vision – James Alison

than imagining that it is God who is speaking. And she was right. This is Jesus, the new Adam. Jesus calls her by name, "Mary". As Alison says:

> … at last she instantly knows by whom she has been addressed. It's one of the great magic moments where the real protagonist emerges, not from the tomb. Just think, think about how much time and energy we spend thinking about the tomb as being a place from which Jesus emerged, whereas the whole point is that in the gospel accounts the empty tomb is a place into which people look by mistake. Because Jesus is in fact behind, he is somewhere else completely, …

That is why this is a beginning and not an end. This is why, as Paul says, "So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new"[60]

This poignant moment when the disciple recognises the voice of the master cannot but ring true as a human event. It reflects with utmost accuracy the resurrection belief that permeated the community that would shortly become the church. It is with the experience of the risen Christ that the church has lived since that day.

We shouldn't be too hard on the disciples. It was not easy for them to realise what had happened. Their first reaction was one of unbelief. What sort of answer to their problems was this? We should not think that, because they lived in a time that we might regard as unscientific and uneducated, they were simple people who would believe anything. Theologian Marguerite Shuster reminds us:

> [It cannot] be doubted that the idea of a resurrection was very nearly as implausible to people of the first century as it is to those of the twentieth, whether among the followers of Jesus or among pagans: they knew as well as we do that human life reliably, inevitably and irrevocably ends in death.[61]

This event was not a repeat of the death and resurrection of Lazarus. Lazarus came back to his old life. He needed someone to unwind his shroud. Jesus left his behind. Lazarus would die again later. This was different.[62]

Nobody can give any real meaning to the resurrection without believing in it, in some form or another. Despite the difficulties we all have and which we share with the disciples and with everyone who has ever heard about it, I am simply assuming that your presence here is your own, however faltering and tentative, affirmation of the resurrection. We share the same problems of belief and doubt that the first Christians did.[63]

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[60] 2 Corinthians 5:17

[61] Marguerite Shuster, 'Preaching the resurrection of Christ in Augustine, Luther, Barth, and Thielecke' in Stephen Davis, Daniel Kendall and Gerald O'Collins (eds), *The Resurrection*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 308.

[62] Tom Wright, *John for Everyone Part 2: Chapters 11-21* London, SPCK, p. 141

[63] How will our bodies be put back together? What about those eaten by cannibals? A brief history of Christian resurrection beliefs (theconversation.com)

But we may be entirely mistaken. Our problem may not be with the resurrection but with death, with the relinquishing of our old life, with changing. Shuster comments that our world continues to seek ways to postpone death. As our life expectancy increases, so does our hope that we might, through science, finally overcome death. If we can overcome death, we will not need a resurrection. But she says:

> [S]urely we have noticed, to our sorrow, that all our efforts to conquer death have, if anything, made dying more grotesque, so that now the freedom to *take* one's own life at the end becomes a form of truncated hope.[64]

In his small book, *Being Human*, Rowan Williams identifies our inherent resistance to recognising our own mortality.[65] Our lives have a non-negotiable limit. If we imagine that this is not so, we lead ourselves into "false, destructive models of [our own] power". We imagine that we can stop or reverse history, remake the world in our own image. We see this delusion everywhere: in the posturing of politicians, in the search for yet more wealth, in the denial of the large-scale effects of our own behaviour; in the false confidence that "it" could never happen to me.

Paul reminds us that, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins".[66] That is, if Christ is not raised, nothing has changed; we are still in a futile chase after immortality on our own terms.

As Alison says, the resurrection tells us that "quietly, peacefully, without a shout [death has] become non-toxic." We can now change our point of view and that is precisely what happened to the disciples and the first believers. This change allows us to process various kinds of renunciations. As Paul comments in Romans:

> Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.
> For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.[67]

The followers of Jesus imagined at first that his death had severed their relationship with him. That is the nature of death; it severs our relationships. But that is precisely what didn't happen and Easter Day is the proof. Instead, the resurrection of Jesus opened up a whole new range of relationships. It transformed his disciples, empowering them to create a new society of which we are the inheritors.[68]

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[64] Shuster, pp. 310-11.
[65] Rowan Williams, *Being Human: Bodies, minds, persons*, London, SPCK, 2018, pp. 77-80
[66] 1 Corinthians 15:17
[67] Romans 6:3-5
[68] Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982, pp. 22-23, 60-61

Rowan Williams identifies the resurrection as "an invitation to *recognise one's victim as one's hope*".[69] The crucified victim is the one that God has chosen. God is to be found in the company of that victim. Williams points out that this is no abstract proposition. The victim is the victim of the hearers of the Easter message. "We are, insistently and relentlessly, in Jerusalem, confronted … with a victim who is *our* victim", a victim we recreate whenever we engage in the oppression or diminution of others. That is, our failure to recognise and accept our new life contributes to our continual creation of victims whom we proceed to destroy.

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> 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
> and they shall name him Emmanuel',
> which means, 'God is with us.'[70]

That is what we have discovered: God is with us.

Kevin Hart - "To Christ our Lord":

My only friend,
whose face I could not recognise in a crowd,
whose voice would not make me turn,
forgive me for thinking such things important,
for trusting in only what I can touch.

How often I tell myself
you are not real, and how often I see you
more real than the houses, trees and people that pass
and leave me nothing.

When I am left alone in the cool of evening
you comfort me
when I think of all the dead beneath
you open your hand
and show them as stars beginning to rise.

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[69] Williams, *Resurrection*, p. 11
[70] Matthew 1:23

How can I speak of you
you without whom there would be no world
you who saw
the first beam of sunlight clinging to the world.

Why must silence be so much a part of us
with you hiding behind a mountain,
resting on the other side of a desert,
watching me
as I come towards you,

as I slowly learn about your ways,
about the world that is always between us,
and why I cannot remain the way I am.[71]

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Christ is risen! Alleluia!

[71] Kevin Hart, 'To Christ our Lord', in Les A Murray (ed), *Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry*, North Blackburn, Collins Dove, 1986, p.129

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