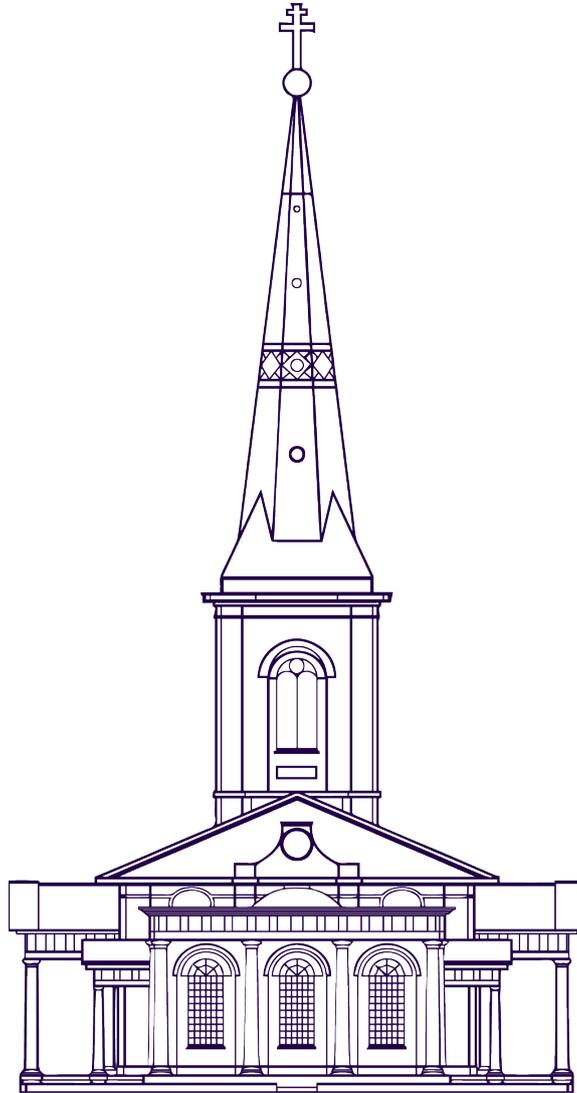


**ST JAMES' CHURCH, KING STREET,
SYDNEY, NSW**



**HOLY WEEK AND
EASTER SERMONS
2022**

The Right Revered Stephen Pickard

The Right Reverend Stephe Pickard



Bishop Stephen Pickard was Executive Director of the *Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture* Charles Sturt University, and Assistant Bishop in the Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn for the past 9 years. Since retiring last month, he continues as an adjunct Professor at CSU writing in the area of church, culture and mission. He has been a recent member of the Doctrine Commission and a former Chair of the Mission and Ministry Commission of the Anglican Church of Australia. In March 2022 he received from the Archbishop of Canterbury, *The Cross of St Augustine*. This Lambeth Award was in recognition of his service to the Anglican Communion as a theologian, teacher and bishop, and in particular in his service of the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission and the Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Unity, Faith and Order. He is married to Jennifer and their larger family includes 4 grandchildren.

PALM SUNDAY – 10 April 2022

Gospel: Luke 23:1-49

We are fellow travellers on the road with the innocent One

Today is the Sunday of palms; signs of joy and welcome on the road. A Sunday to begin the journey of Holy Week. The green palms remind us, green is for life. Alongside this sign we have an ominous counter sign, red stoles and altar frontal. Today we cannot escape the reality that the road along which Jesus road took him to Calvary and his dying. Passiontide is the red hue that hangs over the Palm Sunday welcome. It comes to the fore in the Passion narrative traditionally read on this Sunday. What a contrast; in the midst of life there looms the pressing reality of death. And this is brought to sharpest focus on this day. How so? Because we hear it stated unequivocally that an innocent man is killed.

An innocent man has been killed is Luke's Passion story: so declares Pilate, a criminal and a centurion:

I find no basis for an accusation against this man	Pilate
Herod put an elegant robe on him and sent him back to Pilate	
I have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him and neither has Herod	Pilate
He has done nothing to deserve death	Pilate
What evil has he done?	
I have found no ground for the sentence of death	
This man has done nothing wrong	Criminal
Certainly, this man was innocent	Centurion

By the time you get to the end of the passion narrative in the gospel of Luke it is abundantly clear that an innocent man has been put to death in one of the most barbaric of ways known in the ancient world. And crucified between two criminals – both of whom are guilty. Make no mistake; Luke, our earliest historian and theologian, wants us to be in no two minds about it, an innocent man has been killed.

What is truly remarkable in the Passion narrative for Palm Sunday is that the final and sharpest statement of Jesus' innocence falls from the lips of a Roman pagan. 'When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God – gave God glory – and said, 'certainly this man was innocent'.

And through it all Jesus is silent in the face of the authorities.

Are you the king of the Jews? You say so.

When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad for he was hoping to see Jesus perform some sign. You may remember Jesus Christ Superstar Performed not far from here about half a century ago, Herod's song is memorable (allow me a few excerpts):

*Jesus, I am overjoyed
To meet You face to face
You've been getting quite a name
All around the place*

*So, You are the Christ
You're the great Jesus Christ
Prove to me that You're divine
Change my water into wine*

*So if You are the Christ
You're the great Jesus Christ
Prove to me that You're no fool
Walk across my swimming pool*

Herod questioned him at length. Jesus gave no answer.

In the ancient world people were accustomed to heroic and noble endings for philosophers; in our days the social and political critics. The profession was an intrinsically perilous one, challenging the mighty as well as the lowly. Under interrogation philosophers, knowing their fate was more or less sealed, had the opportunity to show the authenticity of their teaching about virtue and self-control as they gave their defence speech before the authorities. It was expected. The Stoic philosopher Zeno, when called before a tyrant, either bit off the ear of his judge or bit off his own tongue and spat it at the judge rather than betray his fellow conspirators against tyranny. And those schooled in the Torah expected no less. The image of Moses before Pharaoh was powerful; the noble courage of Daniel, and the martyrdom of Rabbi Aqiba in the Bar Kochba revolt. Measured against this literary standard the gospels portrayal of Jesus death appears decidedly disappointing. No dramatic gesture of contempt toward his judges. The pagan critic Celsus criticized Jesus silence. It didn't measure up to what was deemed bold, brave and true. And this criticism probably seems to have been a problem which required an interpretation. Hence the importance of identifying Jesus with the Suffering Servant of the Prophet Isaiah who does not speak (53:7). So we hear in today's Psalm: 'I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting'. Silent resilience in the face of

interrogation. In spite of the temptation that the gospel writer Luke may have felt to dress up the account of Jesus' response to Pilate and Herod he stayed true to the tradition; no embellishment. Jesus remains composed, silent and self-controlled in response to the provocations of the authorities. Thus his final words in Luke's Gospel: 'Father into your hands I commend my spirit'

And there was a division of the people. On the one hand we have the leaders of the people, the soldiers who mock Jesus, the crowd whipped up into a frenzy who bay for his blood. On the other hand are the sympathisers, distressed followers - 'women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him', the penitent thief - 'Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom', 'the lone centurion proclaiming Jesus' innocence'. This second group, anxious, fearful, helpless 'stood at a distance watching these things'.

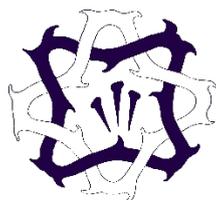
Then finally there is the ideal disciple: Simon of Cyrene. He appears from nowhere, coming in from the country; dragooned into carrying the cross. We know little of Simon of Cyrene; most likely a Jew from what is now known as eastern Libya. Mark's Gospel records he had two sons also at the Passover, Alexander and Rufus, the latter possibly being later the same Rufus in the letter to the Romans. Was Simon subsequently from a family of early Christians known in Rome? In the heretical gospel of Basilides it was taught that Christ, being wholly divine being, could not suffer bodily pain and did not die on the cross; but that the person crucified was, in fact, Simon of Cyrene. Knowing little about someone provides an ideal environment to invent things to suit one's particular unhinged views. In Mark's Gospel it simply says: 'they compelled a passer-by to carry his cross'. Simple historical fact. In Luke's Gospel, 'They laid the cross on him, and made him to carry it behind Jesus'. No longer plain historical report. Now it is a lesson in discipleship. Simon is 'to carry' but Luke adds 'behind or after Jesus'. Luke intends this as an act of discipleship. Not out in front, not lagging behind, but just behind in the footsteps if you will. Simon's kind of following is archetypal. He carries the cross bar immediately behind or after; not at a distance like the others. Of course, being forced to carry the cross, there is a practical sense in which Simon cannot be at a distance. For the gospel writer carrying the cross after Jesus is precisely what being a true follower is about. And it would have resonated deeply in the years that followed when Christians were strung up on crosses.

As we will have been reminded in today's gospel, Luke's gospel does not have a Palm Sunday triumphal entry into Jerusalem. No fanfare nor praise of God from the crowds. It's straight to the business of the day, the mock trial, the killing of an innocent man, the division of the people. Luke sees the passion of Jesus with a wide lens; it is not just an event in a local time and place; it is that but much more; it is an event that will in time reach to the farthest reaches of the world. Luke's is a missionary manifesto. His is a gospel for the missionary martyrs.

Years later when the earliest followers of Jesus were being led out to a martyr's death in the arenas of the Roman Empire they would have been fortified in the knowledge and faith that what was happening to them had happened to Jesus. They were being killed as innocent people, just like Jesus. Charged as being guilty of treason to the Emperor, to Caesar. The ultimate act of disloyalty. Yet the Empire had already, in Luke's mind, acknowledged Jesus' innocence. The Centurion's statement, 'truly this man was innocent', resonated with the earliest Christian communities under persecution. Their allegiance was to the one Lord who was above and beyond the earthly Caesar. They were innocent following after Jesus the innocent one.

It is hard for our minds not to drift with this Gospel to the killing of innocents today; to the terrible barbaric tragedy of the killing fields of Ukraine. So many innocent ones; children, women, men. What was their crime? Of what are they guilty? Ukraine becomes the latest potent and dreaded symbol of a violent and cruel world; a world where despots, crooks and thugs rule with iron fists, either overtly or covertly; where standing at a distance is preferred and judged the safer option; where many beat their breasts and wail at the terror that descends from the skies; where the earth itself is disfigured, and humanity seems to hang by a thread; in a time when innocents are made to be guilty; where victims are turned into troublemakers and exterminated; where the blame game spirals out of control; where cruel leaders of nations become friends and others furtively search for ways and means to resist;

In such a time as this we celebrate Palm Sunday and begin the journey of Holy Week. Let us with take up our position at the beginning of Holy Week in the one place that we are called to be; the one place from which we are truly able to see and follow faithfully; the one place that befits the disciple of Jesus Christ. This is surely the place occupied by one Simon of Cyrene, a portrait of a true disciple. Simon follows, right behind Jesus; not at a distance as the voyeur of a religious event. Let us like Simon walk with eyes looking toward Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of faith.



HOLY MONDAY – 11 April 2022

Gospel: John 12: 1-11

A remarkable display of generosity: Mary's story

I ended my homily for Palm Sunday with an invitation, an exhortation to take our place in the Holy Week story. And what better place than to be positioned with Simon of Cyrene, carrying the cross, behind Jesus. I suggested that Simon of Cyrene is, in Luke's Gospel the model disciple. The exemplar to follow. Today in John's Gospel we have another exemplar of the model disciple. Perhaps model is not quite what I'm concerned about. More portraiture. The readings for this Holy Week present an array of portraits of discipleship. Our challenge is to find a resonance between the portraits on offer in the gospels and their implications for the people of God in the world.

The scene is a dinner party. Perhaps you have been to such a dinner to honour and celebrate someone; perhaps a welcome home, a farewell, maybe to mark a special occasion, or simply to celebrate with friends. Another portrait of a disciple emerges at this dinner party. On this occasion the dinner was hosted by Lazarus' family to honour Jesus. Jesus, friend of the family and the one who had raised Lazarus from the dead. To host a dinner for someone is quite something. In fact, you'd be surprised how much eating, feasting and parties can be found in the gospel stories. Jesus evidently enjoyed good company; and in the eyes of many, bad company, as well. Meals were occasions for stories to be told, disputes and arguments to arise, important conversations to be had. Meals indeed, can be many things. It is no surprise really, that in the Gospels meals were the place for revelation of God's ways with the world. Home truths of heaven! Often in the enjoyment of the cuisine around a table with Jesus, the taste of heaven was savoured. One thing I am sure of; if I had been Lazarus and lain dead in a tomb for 4 days and then restored to life by one who loved me, as Jesus did Lazarus (scripture says that on hearing of Lazarus' death 'Jesus wept', the shortest sentence in the Bible) then I'd been very keen to celebrate with a party.

Enter Mary, sister of Martha and sister of Lazarus. In Luke's Gospel (Luke 10:38-42) in that well-known story Mary is seated at the Lord's feet listening attentively while Martha got on with the tasks of the household and, at the same time complaining about her lazy sister who didn't lift a finger. A not uncommon cause of strife in families. In that famous story Mary, unlike her sister Martha, is not distracted with many things but 'chooses the better part', attentive to Jesus positioned at his feet. In today's reading from John's Gospel there is Martha, true to form, serving. And we are told Lazarus was at table with Jesus. And there was at least a small crowd that included the disciples; perhaps then at least 14 or so; probably a lot more because Lazarus' raising from dead was hardly the village secret in Bethany. Moreover, it does seem from the story that there were gate crashers at the dinner party.

This time Mary is not at the feet of Jesus listening. Rather she does a quite extraordinary thing. 'Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair'. The amount of perfume is absurdly over the top. It was an eastern ointment made from the pistachio nut. About 12oz, pure and of high quality. Certainly not something you expend in one go; it has to last for a long time. Frankly it is excessive. Only in John's Gospel do we hear that Mary wiped Jesus' feet with her hair. Normally Jewish women never unbound their hair in public since loose hair was a sign of loose morals. Evidently Mary's love for Jesus overrode her sense of propriety. She probably wiped the ointment in, and the excess wiped off with her hair. It would have been easy for Mary to anoint Jesus' feet. The guests undoubtedly reclined on mats on the floor with their heads and hands close to the table and their feet extending out in the opposite direction.

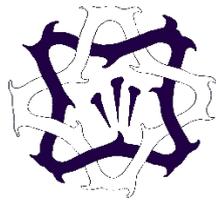
The fragrance of the perfume filled the whole house. A sign no doubt of how lavish Mary's display of love was. Through the ages, interpreters have seen in this a sign that this story of generosity as a response to Jesus' generosity would fill the whole earth. In middle eastern culture of the time when the male head of a household died and left only female survivors, the women usually had great difficulty making ends meet and often became destitute. If this was the situation that Lazarus' death created for Mary and Martha, we can appreciate how grateful they must have been to Jesus for restoring their brother to them. Even if they were rich, and the cost of Mary's ointment suggests that they may have been, the restoration of a loved brother was reason enough for great gratitude and festivity.

Of course, even the least savvy person in financial affairs can see a difficulty here. Clearly the cost benefit of expending such an expensive amount of perfume on one person doesn't stack up. Judas, in the story, is just doing his thing. His job is the money business; the small time CFO of the Jesus group. Judas is the voice of practical reason and common sense. Why, we could get 300 denarii for this and give it to the poor. In the culture of that day 300 denarii was a full years' wage for a working man. You can hear the unspoken thought 'but this woman has wasted it'. Poor Judas, like so many, he knew the cost of everything and the value of nothing. And his words rang hollow; he cared little for the poor. In fact we are told he was a thief. His selfishness contrasts sharply with the generosity of Mary.

Mary's anointing of Jesus' body was a prophetic act, a sign of his coming death and burial. She may not have fully grasped that; but this only serves to magnify the selflessness of her offering. Mary gives abundantly of what she has; a sign and foretaste of the life that Jesus will give for all. Mary of Bethany correctly grasps the right praxis of discipleship. Mary, in the Gospels embodies both the ideal contemplative and the boldness of a true disciple. Mary, another of the timeless, representative figures so wonderfully portrayed in this Gospel.

This dinner party on the eve of the fateful Passover provides us with another portrait of the model disciple in the figure of Mary. Mary becomes the type of the church of Jesus Christ.

A church called to minister the fragrance of the good news upon a world that is suffering; a world where in the natural order of things and in the violent disorder of things there is decay, dying and burial. The ecclesia of God has indeed an ointment to comfort broken bodies, broken lives and broken spirits. As individuals we are in need of just this kind of perfumed fragrance in our lives; as a church we are in need of such an anointing of the Spirit; as a society we are in need of such acts of kindness and generosity. Mary's gift is a sign of the greater gift of the eternal Spirit of Love seen in the face of Jesus Christ. The portrait of Mary offered in our gospel for today offers us a portrait of what it means to live generously as a church of disciples.



HOLY TUESDAY – 12 April 2022

Gospel: John 12: 20-36

The cost of seeing Jesus: the Greeks at the Feast

Some Greeks said to Philip, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus'. How many sermons might you imagine have been preached on these few words! You can actually google this! But let's take a step back for a brief moment. Who are these Greeks (Hellenists)? All we know is that they aren't Jews; possibly proselytes (God fearers) who are permitted limited access to the events and liturgical celebrations of the Passover. We are never told their names; and we never hear anything more of them. They appear and then they disappear. So why here? Just before our gospel reading today, we are told of the despair of the Pharisees about Jesus who raised Lazarus from the dead and the crowds who went after him. 'The Pharisees then said to one another. "You see, you can do nothing. The whole world has gone after him". The whole world indeed! Jesus beyond Israel; Jesus beyond Judaism. Jesus for the world. Jesus amongst the Gentiles. At this point John's Gospel marks a shift to the Gentiles. Israel has misunderstood and rejected Jesus, but the Gentiles are turning towards him. By contrast with the stubborn resistance and bone headedness of the leaders of Israel some Greeks appear on the stage; no name just an empty set prefiguring the rest of the world. And their desire and intent was simple: 'Sir we wish to see Jesus'. And Jesus' replied, 'I'm not available for an interview'! Well not exactly but in truth that's the result. The Greek word *idein*, does in fact mean something like an *interview*, literally to meet with someone; to see someone not at a distance but up close and personal.

The fact is Jesus does not accede to their request. By this stage in the Passion narrative interview time has passed.

The Greeks in this passage are figures of the curious world; the world of seekers; those who have a sense that there might be something here worth pursuing; those who have been of more recent times referred to as 'inquirers'; 'seekers not dwellers'; religious and spiritual tourists en route to becoming pilgrims; those who have much to learn about being true followers. The Greeks at the Feast are there at the dawning of the gospel. So, what will it cost to have an interview with Jesus? What is involved in truly seeing?

The Greeks at the feast offer us a portrait of the seeker. Jesus message to the Greeks, indeed to all, is that only after his death and resurrection can he be truly seen. To be truly visible to the world will be costly for Jesus. For those desirous of seeing Jesus they too will have to discover the cost of being able to truly see with eyes of faith.

Jesus explains with a parable how his death will enable the Gentiles to see him. 'Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit.' The grain of corn must be planted, and afterwards rot away (break open), if it is to be fruitful. Otherwise it remains alone and cannot reproduce itself. The natural analogies with the vegetative cycles of farming have proved an enduring trademark of mystery religions and pagan cults of ancient times and in some respects are undergoing a renaissance today. The Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung, son of Lutheran pastor, argued that archetypal processes such as death and resurrection were part of the 'trans-personal symbolism of the collective unconsciousness, and could be utilized in the task of psychological integration. He also proposed that the myths of the pagan gods who symbolically died and resurrected foreshadowed Christ's literal/physical death and resurrection. Jung's focus was the unconsciousness and the maturation of the self. Well and good but not quite a home run. By contrast Jesus' talk of dying and bearing fruit analogous to the life cycle of a grain of wheat takes us to the heart of God's ways with the world in time and space. The somewhat sunny analogy with wheat becomes a window into the way of the God who suffers in Jesus Christ for the sake of the life of the world. This is serious territory. Forgiveness is a costly business. I am reminded that C S Lewis' referred to Christianity as a true myth i.e. in real time and space something momentously happens that in a sense turns the whole world upside down.

The Church however so often acts as if this wheat analogy is simply a nice way to talk about things. But it entirely fails to grasp the profound ethical claims made upon would be disciples of Jesus.

But it's all there in embryo: 'Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life'. Here is the familiar language of the Fourth Gospel: contrasts between love and hate; contrast between the two orders of existence, this world and eternal life.

It does not come naturally to human beings to lose their life so that they might keep it. It goes against the grain of our natural instincts for preservation to see our lives and the life of the church as having to fall to the ground, break open in order to be fruitful and add value to the world. I recall here that last Saturday in my interview with Fr Andrew he asked me about the change needed in the Church. I recalled some years ago while working with 4 parishes to facilitate greater cooperation, one person said to me quite candidly that they realised change was necessary but that it was not going to happen while they were alive. I mused on the fact that for some of the Church the pain of dying was preferable to the cost of living. The greater reality is that in the Church especially of the West change, like the tide is most assuredly coming. The wheat, whether we like it or not is falling to the ground and will break open and new fruit will eventually appear. In truth that is what is happening to the institutional church and has been for many years. A profound metanoia, a turning around, repentance, a falling to the ground, a breaking open of the heartlands of our institutional life, a divestment of self, of the ecclesial body; a kenosis or emptying and taking on the form of a servant or more accurately slave (*doulos*). Often, we have been forced to this place by the truth that has been revealed; that which was hidden in darkness has come to light. You can grasp immediately how central these words of Jesus for the Gentile who desires to see him. Seeing is costly. Truly meeting another requires something from us. How much more is the claim upon us to live by faith and not by sight in order to truly see and meet the risen Lord.

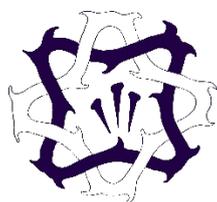
I recall many years ago a young man came to see me on the eve of his ordination. He was agitated and disturbed in spirit as he contemplated what was looming. 'Bishop Stephen I am concerned that the ministry is going to kill me'. I was momentarily struck dumb. Here was a disciple who saw himself as wheat, falling to the ground, and Jesus words clearly rattled him. I don't know where my response came from, but I blurted out: 'John you are absolutely right, the ministry will kill you.' I could see this wasn't the pastoral response he was looking for. I continued: 'But that's not the question; the real question is 'how do you wish to die'? I don't know what we talked about after that, but it would I imagine it might have been something along the lines of Jesus' words in the gospel today: 'Whoever serves me must follow me, and wherever I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour'.

But here's the thing. For the seeker, the curious, for the religious tourist to become a pilgrim, for the church desiring to be repaired, renewed or transformed (any of these words will suffice), for all who wish to see Jesus, to have an interview up close and personal there will be a costly journey ahead; it will cost us our lives. The great theologian Jurgen Moltmann was being quizzed by a younger student who was complaining about something to do with the life of a would-be theologian in the Church, issues to do with career prospects, recognition, appreciation etc. Moltmann is reported to have replied, somewhat tersely it seems, 'you must divest yourself'. This is the pathway of the Son of God into the far country, the path of kenosis

of Jesus Christ, who took on the form of a slave. And those who seek to follow in his footsteps must expect to go the same way.

The path of Jesus is via the hill of Golgotha. It is a costly journey but immensely fruitful. 'I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself'. How have we in our own lives being drawn into the orbit of God's love and service? What have we seen and what has it cost us? What more might lie ahead? Unfinished business on the discipleship road. What then does God ask of me this Holy Week?

The Greeks at the feast; not so much a portrait but a snapshot of a seeker. The tribe of seekers is growing these days. The seeker is not far from any of us for we too carry in our hearts unfulfilled longings for something more. May the good and gracious God draw us further along the discipleship road. May we find the strength and faith to pay the cost.



HOLY WEDNESDAY – 13 April 2022

Gospel: John 13: 21-32

The sin that clings so closely: Judas's despair

Yesterday it was the Greeks at the Feast, Monday Mary at home with Jesus; Palm Sunday Simon of Cyrene with the cross behind Jesus. All in different ways portraits of discipleship. Today Judas, the would-be follower. What went wrong, why and what shall we make of Judas as a portrait of a disciple, a failed one at that? The scene is well known; so too the dialogue. Let us briefly attend to the story.

First the backstory. At the Passover Festival, likely the Passover meal though somewhat unclear as the gospel writer records it. We read, 'The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray Jesus'. And later Jesus says of his betrayer: "This is to fulfil the scripture, 'The one who ate my bread' has lifted his heel against me". A quote from Psalm 41:9 – 'Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted his heel against me'. Lifting the heel: the sudden kick of a horse; the one who shakes off the dust of his feet against another.

Jesus is troubled in spirit. Some exegetes make a distinction between (a) being troubled as a reference to the Holy Spirit and (b) being troubled in his human spirit i.e. the seat of emotion. I don't think we can separate these two. Jesus Christ, in all he is and does lives and moves as

a fully human being in the power of the Holy Spirit. He can't be split into two persons. The history of reflection on Jesus Christ is littered with attempts to figure out the nutty problem of the two natures of Christ and how they can co-exist in the one incarnate Son of God. Welcome to the world of Christological controversy. The incarnate second person of the Trinity in the life of Jesus Christ is a wholly composite person in which the logos of God dwells in human form with all the features of a human being in a fallen world. That is simply to state the reality and it brings with it a bucket load of challenging issues and many books and treatises. But not for today.

Here Jesus the prophet speaks of a betrayer. The disciples are puzzled, perplexed, who can it be? Seating arrangements at such meals is familiar enough in that culture: on matts/cushions around a low table; they are in a reclining position on the left side; left arm to support the body; right arm and hand free for use. The one who Jesus loved, (we believe it is John), reclines next to him. Simon Peter probably reclining next to the one whom Jesus loved. He can't easily speak directly to Jesus, at least not with any privacy. So he says to John, 'hoi, check out who it is' or words to that effect. And the beloved disciple, leans back into the bosom of Jesus and whispers in his left ear 'Lord who is it?' Jesus answers 'The one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish'. So, this is what happens. Judas takes the bread; grasps the bait. At that moment it says of Judas, 'Satan entered into him'. This was the moment when Judas irrevocably committed himself by consenting to the tempter's suggestion. And so, says one interpreter 'giving the tempter admittance to his soul'. Now no one but the beloved disciple knew what's going on because he was the one who had leant back onto Jesus chest to ask him who was the betrayer. The rest thought maybe he was going to get food but that would be odd given it is evening; maybe he was going to give some money to the poor (he was the bursar) which might make more sense on Passover night. Judas leaves abruptly and it was night. And the wheels are set in motion that will take us to Golgotha and the Tomb.

When Judas goes out it is into the outer darkness; Judas went to his own place. As Jesus had said earlier 'If you walk in darkness you do not know where you are going'. In this we can too easily lose perspective and a sense of the right pathway. The moral compass quickly fades, we revert to defensive actions and survival instincts.

So, what went wrong and why? At this point I want to turn to the letter to the Hebrews for today: 'Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith' (Hebrews 12:1-2). Other translations: 'let us put off or rid oneself of every impediment and the sin which besets us... or the much weaker and poorly attested variant 'the sin which easily distracts us'.

The image is drawn from the athlete running a race. Maximum capability requires jettisoning any weight that encumbers. So too in the race of Christian life (and to be clear in this case it most definitely is a race and dawdlers won't finish), the disciple is enjoined to put away the sin (*hamartia*— those things that cause us to miss the target) that what? *cling so closely* which implies danger; *easily distract us* (weaker sense). But at this point the commentators give up, 'but in what sense this is so remains unclear'. Precisely how is the sin which clings so closely a danger? Perhaps because as someone suggests, such closely clinging sin is deeply 'distressing' and 'hostile'.

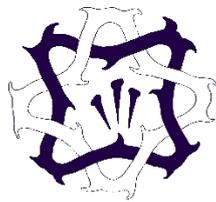
At this point I recall a conversation with a friend, and professional psychologist with a deep interest in the neuroscience of behaviour. He regularly reminds me regarding the human proclivity to stuff up; what the apostle Paul said: 'I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate' (Romans 7:15). 'For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do'. Here is the conundrum of being a human being and moreover a reality of the mature Christian life. As my friend reminds me, 'Stephen remember the things that drag us down, that distress us, that are dangerous to us and overwhelm us internally, they stick like Velcro. The things that enliven, energise free us and bring peace and joy, they slip off like Teflon.' How true! The primitive parts of the human brain designed for dealing with unwelcome contingencies or opportunities for survival and increasing our power exert great influence on our behaviours. The sin that clings so closely is precisely that which trips us up not once but repeatedly; it distresses us. It also has institutional and corporate forms as we see in corruptive and soft corrosive behaviour which end up leading into games of deceit and self-delusion to cover over the sin that clings so closely.

Judas portrait of one in whom we see the depths to which our baser motives, like Velcro, stick. In Dante's *Inferno* Judas is condemned to the lowest circle of hell where he is doomed to be chewed for eternity in the mouths of the triple headed Satan. In the Gospels Judas' actions cause him to despair of life itself. In more recent years the figure of Judas has received a more sympathetic hearing. Even a certain rehabilitation. Judas has been viewed as an instrument of God's providential ordering of salvation. I am reminded of Bob Dylan's lyrics, 'You'll have to decide whether Judas Iscariot had God on his side'. Judas it is presumed wanted a Messiah who would free the people from the Roman authorities; and he was bitterly disappointed. And in that disappointment was an easy target to be bought off with 30 pieces of silver. The 30 pieces of silver continue to be a potent symbol of those who trade their moral sense for immoral mammon.

All human beings play the part of a betrayer or experience the pain of betrayal together with all the emotions and rage, revenge that might flow. The portrait of Judas of which we have but a snippet tonight needs to hang in the gallery of portraits of disciples. In this sense Judas belongs within the ecology of God's providential ordering of the world. In another sense Judas appears as the 'the intractable surd element in the scheme of things', where God in Christ

experiences a measure of defeat in redeeming the world. In short Judas embodies a certain tension between God's providence and the tragedy of human life. As one commentator suggests: 'Judas should be understood as caught up in the suffering and cost of salvation, not as one to be vilified and scapegoated'.

To exclude this portrait of failure is to risk remaining in the dark about our own proclivities to act in a Judas like manner. What then weighs us down? What is the sin that clings so closely in our personal lives and the Church? What indeed sticks like Velcro? May the good Lord give us wisdom, courage and persistence to lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely and run with perseverance the race set before us looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.



MAUNDY THURSDAY – 14 April 2022

Readings: Exodus 12: 1-4, 11-14, 1 Corinthians 11: 23-26 & John 13: 1-17, 31-35.

Maundy Thursday: remembering the Body of Christ

Maundy Thursday is the time in Holy Week when we remember two things. First, we remember the institution of the Last Supper and second, we remember the ministry of the towel. And what we remember about these two kinds of remembering is that in both actions we are put back together again, literally re-membered. In short Maundy Thursday offers a clue as to how human beings are made whole and enabled to bring God's wholeness and healing to a fragmented and often dispirited people.

The first remembering concerns the Eucharist. Jesus said: 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' The great and enduring liturgical rite of the Eucharist is all about remembering Jesus Christ. And on Maundy Thursday in Holy Week each year the people of God give thanks for the institution of the Lord's Supper. The liturgical sign and sacrament of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And we know the words well but often miss their bite.

The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread – this is my body. The Greek is clear, it is my *soma* i.e. myself. Jesus does not say my *sarx* i.e. my flesh. When he held the bread before the disciples it was more akin to 'here is my whole self, all I am for you and for the world. The bread is the very stuff of life. That is what I am for you'.

When you eat this, or as Luther said ‘when you munch on me’, remember all that I am for you. And remember is not just a brain thing. Not simply think about it all, mentally conjure up clear concepts and propositions about the meaning of all this. No, it is literally re-member. This is the eucharist that puts us back together again – we are re-membered. Our members are reconstituted. Moreover, in this act of remembrance the reality of Christ’s love and sacrifice for the world is made alive again. It becomes a present living reality yet again. I call it the magic of remembering. No longer a distant past being retrieved from the reaches of the mind. Rather a re-presentation in powerful symbolic form of the presence of Christ in the power of the Spirit in the faithful gathering. Being put back together again, re-membered, is what happens in the great liturgical feast of the Eucharist. The Reformer John Calvin was quite clear about this when he recommended that the Supper of the Lord be celebrated weekly.

In the Eucharistic Feast remembering is never simply a past recollection but rather a past event becomes alive again as a present reality. We are familiar with this kind of remembering from other parts of our lives where often something in the present can trigger memories and emotions from a distant past that come alive again as if it were only yesterday that something occurred. In brief past and present co-inhere. In the Eucharistic liturgy attending to a past event releases the energy of the Spirit of God to make present to the contemporary worshipper the presence of the living God in the midst. The Last Supper becomes a present and continuous Supper of the Lord and we are put back together again; remade, renewed, reconstituted as whole people in Christ. That is why John Wesley referred to the Eucharist as a converting ordinance.

If, in this Holy Meal we truly are put back together again as living members of the Body of Christ; if this act of remembrance is so pivotal to our being the ecclesial body then the Eucharist is the sign par excellence of our unity. It is the Supper beyond all suppers; for this Supper re-members the broken parts of the body of Christ. And that is why Christian division around the eucharist is such a scandal. Centuries, nay millennia of quarrelling, refusal to join each other at the table of the Lord. As we eat, we are clearly not being re-membered at all. Maundy Thursday is a good time to renew our commitment to truly love one another and begin to put back together again the broken body of Christ in word and deed and work tirelessly for the one church of God. This would be a prophetic act at a time in our social and political life that is increasingly fragmented and rent asunder with division and self-interest.

And this deeply inscribed liturgical act does not just appear on the stage of human history out of nowhere; manufactured and promoted by some wily advertising agency. The lineage of this Holy Meal stretches into the deep history and memory of Israel. Our Paschal celebration recalls the Exodus reading for tonight. And it is not surprising for us to locate the deepest origins of the paschal meal we share in the Passover traditions of Israel. Our origins are inextricably linked with the traditions of Abraham and the great story of the exodus and liberation of the people of God from slavery. The Passover meal belongs to that sacred journey

of liberation. Thus, we hear tonight from Exodus that this celebration was to mark the beginning of each new year: “This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of the year”. Something new has happened; escape, liberation, freedom. And for generations to come the Passover meal would be celebrated as a festival and lasting ordinance.

Wherever there is oppression; wherever there is a longing for freedom; wherever the Pharaoh’s of the world laud it over their people in brutal manner (and we could make a list quite easily) or covertly through manipulation and deceit (and we could make another list for this also); wherever people suffer under the yoke of injustice (and we could make a list here both near and far); then in such times and such places the Passover meal is alive and rich and full of symbolic power. And we are heirs of this tradition.

So, we ought not to be surprised that the Exodus story of liberation and the Passover have been so important for Christians in places of suffering. The whole movement known as liberation theology originating in South America in the mid twentieth century looks to the story of the exodus and the Passover symbol as its founding paradigm. Tonight, we remember all who struggle for freedom from oppression. It is a Maundy Thursday mandate. This Eucharist, a new Passover for the Christian Church, founded upon the faith of Abraham, Moses, Sarah, Ruth and the prophets, looks to a new liberator even Jesus Christ. As a devout Jew he too kept the Passover and in the economy of God he transformed the ancient Passover. A new day of liberation dawned; traditional boundaries were broken; the meal became the meal of liberation of the cosmos; the forgiveness of sins and the hope for new life with God.

But tonight, there is another kind of remembering; a second remembering. It is remembering the towel and the foot washing. If the Eucharist is the worldly liturgical act that makes others whole. There is no institution of the Last Supper in John’s gospel. At precisely the place that the other gospels have the Passover meal John’s gospel speaks of ‘an evening meal’ before the feast of Passover. Instead of bread being taken, offered, broken and distributed we have a towel and a basin of water. Jesus is so intentional about this act. The foot washing is relayed to us in such a way that it cannot be perceived as a mere accident or a peripheral part of the evening. The Gospel writer sets the tone for it by telling us it was a moment of full consciousness for Jesus. Jesus knew his hour had come for death; Jesus knew that he had come from God and was going to God; then we have string of verbs: he rose from the table; took off his outward garment; tied a towel around his waist; poured water into a basin; and began to wash his disciple’s feet.

It was common in ancient Palestine to wash the feet of guests in one’s home as an act of courtesy, especially if they had journeyed a distance. But this washing was normally done by a non-Jewish slave at the moment of entry, not at the end of a meal. On occasions a group of disciples might do it for their rabbi as a sign of respect. But here it is Jesus who intentionally acts as a slave-servant to his disciples. And Peter is at first offended and refuses the

ministration of Jesus. Never my feet. He misses the point entirely of the ways of God. Though he was in the form of God he did not think equality with God was a thing to be grasped but emptied himself/humbled himself and took the form of a slave, even to death, even death on a cross. Whoever would be a follower of Christ will need to walk the way of Christ, as a servant. Peter exclaims: 'Oh yes if that's the case Lord then not just my feet but the whole body', or words to that effect. He kind of gets it but in truth he proves he doesn't yet understand. So later that same night: 'Aren't you one of his disciples? I am not, I am not, I am not, and the cock crowed. Peter's Judas moment. A case of selective memory loss; he refuses to remember.

In the early 2000s the leader of the world-wide L'Arche Community, Jean Vanier, visited St Mark's Theological College in Canberra when I was Director. At the end of three days in conversation with people from all walks of life and Christian traditions listening to the stories of those with disabilities of various kinds we gathered in the chapel and in a simple liturgy we washed one another's feet. Vanier, a Roman Catholic, scholar and gentle servant of the L'Arche community led us in this act. It was, he said the only sacrament we had left to bind us. At this point we pass from eucharistic elements to what has been referred to as the third and greatest sacrament. The sacrament of the towel. The towel of humble service; the diaconal character of the church.

In a church still divided over the sacrament of the altar and always, it seems in contest about the word, and even in baptism not entirely unified, perhaps the only sacrament that unites us is the sacrament of the towel. The symbol of the towel points us beyond our selves to others; and it does so in a way that invites us to honour others as bearers of the image of God. We hear the words of Jesus: "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you".

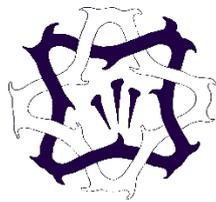
When Jesus the servant tells the disciples 'Love one another' and then adds 'as I have loved you'. The character of such love is immediately transparent. This is the new commandment and it is the origin of the name Maundy, from the Latin *Mandatum Maude*— a new commandment. And later linked to the English tradition of distributing to the poor the Maundy money.

The maundy love is of a kind that does indeed put people back together again. Simon Peter eventually came to himself, though it was a painful journey. He was put back together again as a servant of Christ; he carried the towel and ministered the everlasting gospel. As tradition has it, he was crucified in Rome upside down because he did not consider himself worthy of being crucified the same way as his master. I imagine him praying the prayer of the good thief on the cross, 'Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom'.

So, tonight as we celebrate in the Eucharist that great act of self-giving of Christ; as we break the bread, drink the cup, and serve with the towel in our care for a broken world we prove that we have truly remembered Christ in the Eucharistic feast. And this sacrament of the towel is precisely the way in which others are put back together again; that they too are remembered and not forgotten by God.

The beloved disciple had well-honed theological instincts. He recognised that the eucharistic feast is not complete until the Passover has literally passed over into the life of service symbolised in the towel. If it doesn't translate into this act of humble service, then our memory is defective; a kind of selective memory loss of the Church. And so, it is for good reason that the foot-washing became associated from early times with the Maundy Thursday liturgy.

Tonight, is a festival of thanks; of eucharist i.e. thanksgiving. It is a festival of the Lord who calls us to not only eat the bread and drink the cup. But to complete the eucharist in our own lives of humble and unpretentious service. What must we do to make this a reality in our lives and the church? How might we carry the towel of service into the world for which Christ gave his life? To him be praised now and forever.



GOOD FRIDAY – 15 April 2022

Readings: Isaiah 52: 13 – 53: 12, Psalm 22, 1 Corinthians 1: 18-31 & John 18: 1 – 19: 42.

The wisdom of God was nailed to the cross on Good Friday

From Mandy Thursday we journey through the night Good Friday; God's Friday. And we remember that the wisdom of God was nailed to the cross on Good Friday.

The great need of our times; the great challenge of our times; the great human project: how to live wisely on this planet beloved of God. More than ever in this country, we need wisdom to navigate the dangers and remarkable opportunities these turbulent times of transition offer to us. We are all too aware of the remarkable diversity of our society; of the emerging tension between secular and post secular accounts of Australia; the scale of human need and the precarious nature of the blue planet upon which we live for a time and a season. How then might we as a people work together to cultivate a fresh wisdom for civil society; to work for the common good as a foundation for a new national consciousness? On this holy day, a crack opens up in the heavens; we glimpse in the strange new world of the Bible a secret clue to the enduring search for wisdom: 'we proclaim Christ crucified...the power and wisdom of God' (1 Cor 1: 23-24). Not a program with 7 steps to wisdom; not a magic formula but a life in the flesh on the road to Golgotha and a tomb of burial.

Good Friday reminds us that wisdom is often born in the crucible of suffering. There is no such thing as cheap wisdom. 'They crucified him, and with two others, one on either side'. As we follow in the footsteps of Jesus, we too can find wisdom through our own sufferings and challenges. Wisdom is not a band-aid solution to cover over the ailments. Rather it is like a healing medicine. Wisdom works in a similar way to what in medical terms it is known as granulation. In granulation theory the healing begins in the body beneath the wound. Wisdom is to be found just beneath the wounds of our society; it is embedded in the very things that perplex, confront and divide us: asylum seekers and people migration, indigenous reconciliation, ethical leadership, health and education, gay marriage and gender issues, controversies over the environment and climate change. Wisdom calls us not to flee from such things. Rather go deeper into them because that is where the healing wisdom and its sister courage will be found.

Wisdom too involves risk and uncertainty. There in the Gospel for this Good Friday we hear of Joseph of Arimathea, 'a disciple of Jesus' 'though a secret one' for fear of being exposed. He seeks permission to take the body of Jesus. And also, the Pharisee Nicodemus, 'who had first come to Jesus by night' also came. Low key, incognito, on the wisdom road but at a distance. Perhaps there might come a time when Joseph and Nicodemus would no longer be disciples in secret. Hopefully they would in time find a more relaxed and open posture as followers of the God of Jesus Christ.

In truth wisdom is betrayed daily. Judas and Peter in the Gospel today play their own part. In their own ways they represent figures who let wisdom be trampled over out of fear, or self-interest. Indeed, it seems we have a surplus of self-interest and a deficit of wisdom. We may be living in the twilight of wisdom and its sibling, compassion. When people are anxious and afraid wisdom always struggles to make her voice known. When the room of our lives and nation is filled with fear, wisdom exits by the back door. Fear and security have so invaded the moral landscape of our lives that wisdom and the courage it requires of us is simply squeezed out.

In my life I have found the deepest and most compelling wisdom to be found under the shadow of the cross; at the ground beneath the cross. The wisdom of God was nailed to the cross on Good Friday. Jesus Christ; the embodiment of God's wisdom that was despised and rejected.

When I think of Holy Week and Good Friday in particular, I liken this Passiontide as a kind of 'thick wisdom'. It can be compared to the rather thin kinds of wisdom on offer in a market driven, power obsessed, entertainment and pleasure-seeking culture; where we are more familiar with fake versions of wisdom. Thick wisdom has a certain theological density that you can drill down into and never quite reach the base. It is multi-layered, rich, sustaining and dense. It comes to us at certain concentration points. Sacraments are remarkable codifications of God's rich wisdom. Our Sacred Scriptures and the great truths of faith narrate

and expound this wisdom. And they do it in such a way that there is always a surplus, abundance of wisdom still be discovered. And in the contemplative and mystical traditions the wisdom of God reminds us of the ineffable dimension of the all wise God.

By contrast thin wisdom is the kind that has little substance; high in sugar and carbs but lacking in protein for energy and staying power. It is more akin to spin wisdom. St Paul knew all about this thin wisdom. Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Read: where is the spin doctor; where is the political operative? Where is the wheeler and dealer designed to convince us, we need things that we don't. That wisdom quickly runs into the desert sands of ignorance.

Thin wisdom is precisely what the apostle Paul was dealing with at Corinth. The Church had become mesmerised with personalities, their power and their so-called wise words. In this war of wisdom Christ was being divided up. In the process the Church was divided, fragmenting; the breeding ground for factions, grabs for power and spiritual snobbery.

What on earth would outsiders think; pagans, gentile inquirers and Jews? A Church preoccupied with its own internal conflicts was hardly an apostolic Church for the world. From the apostle Paul's point of view the thin wisdom of the Corinthians was simply mimicking the surrounding religions than the wisdom of the gospel of the crucified Lord. It was an age in which some looked for miraculous signs; others searched for esoteric wisdom to order life. The apostle writes a letter imploring the Corinthian Church to dig for a deeper, denser, thicker wisdom. This wisdom means we boast about God but not ourselves. 'Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord'.

God's wisdom is greater than our wisdom, and with God by our side we too can walk in wisdom. Nobody who puts their trust in the God of Jesus will ever be disappointed. There is no deficit of wisdom here; there is only new unexplored possibilities and knowledge that shines a light on everything else in life, gives us purpose and makes everything else so much better and worthwhile.

For us and this world the wisdom of God was nailed to the cross on Good Friday. And in truth so were we. Is there then a true word of wisdom to be found on the lips of mere mortals? Can we find a portrait of a disciple for Good Friday? I can think of no better candidate than the thief on the cross. Christ most assuredly gave his life for both thieves at Calvary. But on this day I have in mind what tradition has called 'the good thief'. He is a portrait of the guilty desperate disciple. We all play this part. So on this most solemn day in the Church's year we place ourselves with the good thief on the cross. We dare not rush to Sunday. Instead we join with the disciple on the cross and pray with him his words of wisdom: 'Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom'.

Amen.

EASTER VIGIL – 17 April 2022

Gospel: Matthew 28: 1-10

We grow towards the light of God that shines from the face of Jesus Christ

We gather for the Easter Vigil, we watch, we wait. We come at the new dawn; we come at first light; the full fire and the blazing light – you'll have to stay for the 10am! As the first day of the week was dawning the two Mariams; Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (probably Martha and Lazarus' sister) come to the burial place. Probably for no other reason than they just needed to be close to the one they had loved and followed. A kind of consolation in their grief.

Then comes the great interruption; the dazzling light of an Angel, the earth shook, a bolder is rolled and the angel sat on the stone. Strange how you often hear something for the first time. What's this business about 'and sat on it'? No doubt a sign of great significance and authority and at the same time a certain comic note is struck perhaps! Can you picture the scene? It's not normal. But then again at significant times in the biblical narratives angelic visitations occur as messengers of God. The life and times of Jesus of Nazareth are top and tailed with angles: Gabriel to Mary; to Joseph on two occasions, one to tell him to take Mary for his wife, on a second occasion to warn him in a dream to take Mary and the baby to Egypt; angels ministered to Jesus in his temptations. And now an angel appears to announce that Jesus has been raised. In truth there is more to this world and our lives than we can ever fully grasp. This is intuitively known today with the increasing interest in things spiritual; and even angels are making something of a comeback. In one sense it is a protest against a highly reductionist approach to our life, relationships and culture where everything seems to be flattened out and the spirit leached. The spiritual realm is likewise richer than we can ever imagine. There is a greater world that eludes the grasp of this world.

In Matthew's Gospel today we hear the words, 'Do not be afraid; I know who you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here for he has been raised. . . .' By all means come and see the place where he was but then go. Don't waste your time searching in empty places. It is far too easy to preoccupy ourselves in what are in effect empty places; places that have no life, that give no life, that suck life and energy from us; whatever it might be for us as individuals, the church and society. Investing in empty pursuits; ignoring opportunities for life, joy and serving those who are in need. A culture of self-interest, the deeply narcissistic culture of our times where the individual is promoted as the centre of the universe and ends up a hollowed-out shell of thing, a tomb. Meanwhile God has moved on; Jesus has been raised; a brand-new day is dawning; a time of promise and freedom.

It is not without purpose that our Easter Vigil is laced with the great stories that shaped Israel's life and destiny. Abraham and Isaac, a story of God's promise of life not death for all people, Jew and Gentile. The resurrection of Jesus breaks the walls of division and separation; the

promise of God cannot be the preserve of any race, language, or nation. It is now universalised. No longer just a promise to Israel but to the world. The Exodus story is no longer simply the story of the freedom of an oppressed people long ago but now a new Exodus, a new freedom for all. All this and more densely compacted into the raising of Jesus by the power of the eternal Spirit.

You'll find him in Galilee. Galilee, where it all began; where the hard work and sense of purpose was originally forged; Galilee, far from the seat of power and wealth in Jerusalem. Where it all began for Jesus and his first disciples, in that very place there will be a new beginning. The return to Galilee symbolises a fresh beginning; the take off point for a life in the Spirit. It will reach to the ends of the earth; even to the Great South Land of the Spirit, its peoples and country, even to this house of God on this day!

The women are overjoyed and probably in shock and disbelief even as they believe. Their fear is their awe at what they have just seen and heard. This kind of fear (a poor word to grasp their feelings); this fear will be the kind that puts steel in their backbones, courage and resilience for the life of faith in the face of so many challenges and dangers. This awe in the presence of the Holy takes people to the next level and brings out the best from us. It raises us to our proper nature and character. It lives by the promises of a good and just God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Sarah, Ruth, the Prophets, Mary and the saints down the ages. It lives in the freedom of the children of light; a gift from the One who gives light, and in whose light, we see with Easter eyes; and everything looks different, relationships, attitudes, energies. And there is a note of joy. Why, it took hold of the prophet Miriam after the Israelites crossed the red sea and were saved from the pursuing armies. 'Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: 'Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.' Jesus becomes the Lord of the dance.

Off, they go with the message. Suddenly Jesus is there. Greetings, hail, geday, hoi you two. Take your pick. Literally rejoice, but a form of greeting. And this is indeed a joyful greeting from Jesus. When Judas greets Jesus and the soldiers mock Jesus, with a fake greeting the same word is used. But in this instance the word is redeemed; a truthful greeting.

The women came to him, they took hold of his feet, an act of profound reverence and intimacy, they worshipped him. The word means to prostrate oneself, to kneel before. Their response to his greeting is a recognition that they are in the presence of no mere mortal. Here is a first-hand encounter with the risen Christ; a remarkable and privileged event told through the centuries across the globe.

Again, don't be afraid. The women have come at the break of dawn; at the first light they see light; Angelic light and the light of Christ. The light of God is an attractive light; it beckons us forward, even as it shines into us dispelling the darkness and raising us to a new life. How

has the light of God shone in your life? How has it led you? The magic of the light of God is that it draws us and grows us into the full stature of the children of God with our brother, saviour and Lord, Jesus Christ.

This Easter Vigil, at first light, the risen Christ greets us again: hail, rejoice a new day has dawned. Come enter into the life I have for you. What shall I bring? Bring nothing; my light is sufficient for the way ahead.

EASTER DAY – 17 April 2022

Gospel: John 20: 1-18

I have seen the Lord: the testimony of Mary Magdalene

The great gift of Easter is to see everything new; to see the world with Easter eyes. And I do mean everything new: our personal lives, the ordering of society, money, sex, power. Everything is exposed to the light of the resurrected Christ. Easter eyes for everything. This doesn't mean everything now appears rosy. But it does mean we see everything differently. This is the day of resurrection, the Greek *anastasis*, literally made to stand up again. From horizontal in the tomb to standing outside the tomb. Everything hangs upon this. It's life or no life. The Apostle Paul reminds us that 'If Christ has not been raised, our proclamation has been in vain; your faith is futile ... you are still in your sins If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. Clearly Easter day does not silence the sceptics. But it does mean that the last word; the most enduring words are words of joy and gratitude.

John's Gospel today offers a portrait of Mary Magdalene. She is in a long line of portraits of disciples we have explored this Holy Week: Simon of Cyrene carrying the cross behind Jesus, Mary who anointed the feet of Jesus with expensive oil; the Greeks at the Feast of Passover desiring to see Jesus, the despair of Judas, the wisdom of the thief on the cross. On Easter Sunday it is Mary Magdalene the first evangelist; the first disciple of the resurrected Lord. Mary is from the root Mariam from which we have Miriam, Mary and Marie. Magdalene refers to her village (Magdala) from where we believe Mary came; thought to be on the western shores of the Sea of Galilee.

Mary visits the tomb before first light while it was still dark. Why does she go? For no other reason than that she wishes to be close to the one who died. She doesn't know the stone has been removed and the tomb is empty. She just wants to be close. And why not. She loved Jesus and was a follower. In our modern culture death is sanitised. When someone dies the body is whisked away to a mortuary and some may pay a visit but basically it is covered up and removed from view. It is the western way of death. In the ancient world and some cultures today, the body is prepared and laid out in a home or appropriate place so that people can

come, pay their respects and grieve with the family in the presence of the body. Mary's desire to be close to Jesus, even though he has died is most natural. She comes while it is still dark because she wants to be alone.

Of course, when she arrives the stone is rolled away and the tomb is empty. She is shocked and puzzled. Peter comes and leaves. Mary remains at the tomb weeping. Mary had been healed and clearly there was a close bond. Now the tomb is empty and her hope to be close to the Jesus even in death, has been dashed. This final consolation is denied her. She searches and can't find the one her soul loved.

The angels in the tomb question her; 'what are you looking for?' She assumes the body has been secreted away; she turns around and sees Jesus. But she does not recognise him, mistaking him for the gardener. Grief does strange things to us; often we simply don't see what is right in front of us; or rather we don't recognise what we see. 'Sir if you have taken him tell me so that I may get him and take him away'. Then the moment of recognition, 'Mariam'. Instantly she knows who is before her. Mary hears her name and she is immediately overwhelmed by joy. To hear your name from one you love is special. To hear the Lord call our name is to know that we are known. The natural reaction is to embrace the one who calls you. Mary is not backward in coming forward. She must hold on. She calls to him, Rabboni (teacher) for that was what he was for her; the teacher of wisdom. In what seems like a rebuke Jesus says, 'do not cling to me'. Do not grasp me. It seems a hard thing; it probably was. Mary clings to what she knew but it is passing; it will be different henceforth; something new is coming. It's hard to let go and wait for the new thing especially in our grief and moments of unutterable joy like Mary's.

Jesus points Mary to the future with a radical message. Not simply that Jesus is risen the new and startling reality, but what that means. Go tell my brothers; tell them I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God. This is a remarkable. All relations have been radicalised: Jesus is now their brother, of the same blood, inheritors all of the same kingdom; Jesus' Father is their Father, his God is their God. All one in Christ. Things will never be the same again and nor should they. Mary the emissary delivers the first sermon! 'I have seen the Lord'. She is the first witness; the first evangelist of good news and what's more she is a woman. John's gospel has given her pride of place.

Here our reading ends. Some observations.

First, Mary is the first evangelist. Peter believed but only that the tomb was empty. Mary bore witness to the gardener who turned out to be Jesus. If we read on today, we might have expected the next verses to record the reaction of the assembled group of disciples to Mary's news. But there is silence. Instead the text speaks of the next day the disciples being gathered and Jesus appearing to them. It is as if Mary's witness has been silenced – a clue here to the fate of Mary of Magdala. But both here and in Mark's gospel it is the women who bear witness

first. Yet John's Gospel for Easter Sunday betrays a certain ambiguity that reflects the culture of the day regarding woman's testimony. The gospel finishes with a focus on the men. So, we have 'Jesus to Peter, do you love me ... Yes, Lord you know I love you ... tend my sheep etc'. Mary's witness seems to have been eclipsed. Interestingly it is a woman who is the proclaimer and a man (Peter) called to serve and pastor. Very soon in the early centuries of Christianity and under significant cultural pressure men take over most aspects of the public ministry. The Mary tradition goes underground and re-emerges in interesting and challenging ways. But the writer of John's gospel leaves for us some remnants of a primitive and original tradition of Mary; at the headwaters of something startlingly new in the world. The rising of Jesus is opened first to a woman and this cannot be taken away. At a time in our public life when the voices of women are often muted or ignored the figure of Mary Magdalene is a poignant reminder that it was from the lips and witness of a woman that a new world order was proclaimed.

Second Mary is a seeker after God; a seeker after wisdom. She represents all those who hunger for the truth and the deeper meaning of life. Mary's life is a life of journey to wholeness, a journey of redemption from illness, and un-fulfillment into life in the Spirit, for she received the Spirit of Jesus. There are so many on the search for God these days. We are all seekers; hungry for the deepest reality of our lives. Sometimes the search seems fruitless or futile; some give up, some feel abandoned. But because we are made in God's image and bear God's image in our lives there remains a flicker of the Spirit and a primal hunger. The seeker of God perseveres till they find that which is sought. Or till they find, like Mary that they have already been found by God; though at first, they didn't know it. God never gives up on us. Mary bears testimony to that in her life.

Finally, Mary offers us a portrait of the true disciple of Jesus. Mary of Magdala, it has been suggested is the unnamed woman in Luke's Gospel whose colourful reputation preceded her; who wiped Jesus' feet with her tears and poured perfume on them as an act of great thanks for the forgiveness she had experienced; Mary at the cross with other women when the men flee; Mary at the empty tomb for no other reason than that she desires to be near the one she loved; Mary at the feet of Christ the gardener surprised by joy.

Here is a powerful pattern of discipleship: following into the sufferings of Christ and into the sufferings of others; being with others in their emptiness and solitariness where there doesn't seem to be any rhyme or reason when grief strikes; Mary surprised at hearing her name and realising that God has come close; Mary for the sake of joy telling a story of goodness that she cannot contain.

Here is a pattern for us who live like Mary on this side of Easter. The Spirit of the risen Christ gives us Easter eyes to see the world where God is at work: with those in suffering and pain; walking with those in the empty places of nothingness and puzzlement; constantly being

surprised by the voice of another and recognitions that invite love and embrace; living in moments of grace; finding from within us a story of goodness worth telling about God with us.

My brothers and sisters, I am wondering who have been like Christ the gardener standing at the tombs of your life; those who have turned out to be people who have called you by name; given you back your life; surprised you when you least expected it and given you a song to sing; those who have offered the very voice of Christ unknown in the midst. In such times and experiences, you too may have been touched by the unseen God made known in the face of Jesus Christ; you too may echo the words of Mary, 'I have seen the Lord'.

Christ is Risen, Alleluia

S.^TJAMES'
Bicentenary 2019-2024