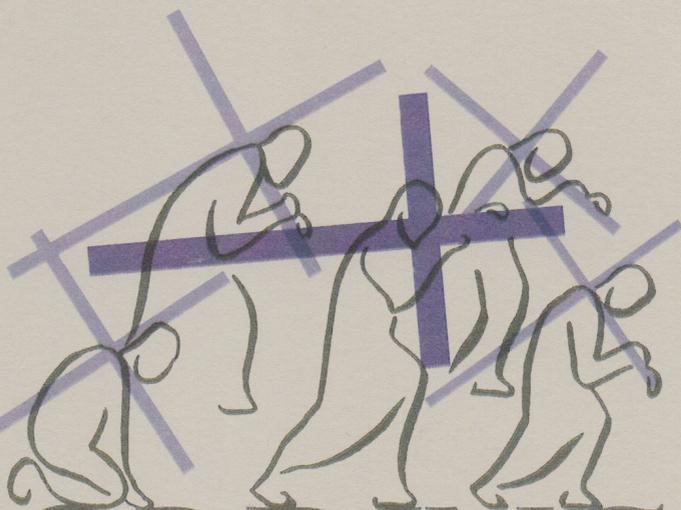


# A Meditation for Holy Week

Peter Sills



ACCORDING  
TO  
JOHN

ACCORDING TO JOHN  
A Meditation for Holy Week

Peter Sills

Published by Ely Cathedral Publications 2007  
Copyright © Peter Michael Sills 2007

Peter Sills has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this book.

No part of this book may be quoted, reproduced, transmitted or stored in any form whatsoever without the prior permission of the author, except that attributed quotations not exceeding 100 words may be used without permission, but the author asks to be notified of such use.

Cover design by Lisa Gifford

Biblical quotations are from The Revised English Bible, copyright © Cambridge University Press and Oxford University Press, 1989, used with permission.

# Contents

Preface	i
1 The Die is Cast	1
2 Supper at Bethany	4
3 The King Comes in Peace	6
4 The Greeks Seek Jesus	9
5 The Gathering Darkness	13
6 Communion & Betrayal	17
7 Crucified under Pontius Pilate	25
8 Waiting	30
9 New Dawn	33

## PREFACE

Holy Week is the most important week of the Christian Year. Day by day we follow Jesus in the last week of his life, and as the story unfolds, we see most clearly what it meant for him to be the Son of God. Here is Isaiah's suffering servant made flesh; here we begin to grasp the meaning of sacrifice. Observing Holy Week ought not to be an optional extra between Palm Sunday and Easter Day. While it is true that our faith is an Easter faith, it is the death of Jesus that is atoning, and it is of this atonement that the resurrection on Easter Day is the glorious confirmation. Easter cannot be fully celebrated if Holy Week has not first been fully observed.

These meditations follow St John's account of the Passion and his alone. Each of the gospel writers has his own voice, and I have found it helpful to listen to the distinctive insights of each, resisting the temptation to create a single 'complete' version of the story. For John, Jesus is the eternal Son of God whose dying reveals his glory. John has no account of the Agony in Gethsemane, no cry of dereliction from the Cross; always Jesus is in control, the subject rather than the object of the story. My debt to William Temple's Readings in St John's Gospel is gratefully acknowledged.

The focus of these meditations is the drama rather than the teaching, and this is why there is no consideration of the so-called farewell discourse, chapters 14 to 17 of the Gospel. When reading them, it is best to read first the appropriate Bible passage at the head of each section, and afterwards take time to imagine yourself in the story. The events may have taken place almost two thousand years ago, but the feelings and motivation of those involved have a very contemporary feel. This is the story of every age. As we enter into it we understand what it means to say that Jesus died for our sins.

Peter Sills  
April 2007

# 1. THE DIE IS CAST

READ: JOHN 11.45-57

*'It is more to your interest that one man should die for the people, than that the whole nation should be destroyed.'*  
*So from that day on they plotted his death.'*

Right from the opening words of his gospel John makes plain the conflict which surrounded Jesus. We tend to miss just how much conflict there is in the gospel because we hear it and read it in bits and pieces, but the level of conflict hits you if you sit down and read it through from beginning to end as John intended. His prologue, which we read every Christmas, sets out clearly what will happen: 'He came to his own, but his own received him not.' And thereafter at every turn in the story, Jesus comes into conflict with the religious establishment of his day. Priests and Pharisees oppose him; a few of the ordinary people follow him, but most are indifferent; many reject him.

Typical is the incident at Capernaum after the feeding of the Five Thousand. When Jesus gives them food the people flock after him; when he points to the meaning of the miracle – that he is the promised Messiah, the one who gives them bread from heaven – they exclaim, 'This is more than we can stomach! Why listen to such talk?' St John tells us, 'From that time on, many of his disciples withdrew and no longer went about with him.' Jesus had friends when he fed them bread to eat, but he found himself friendless when he said, 'I am the bread of life.'

The response to his last and greatest miracle, the raising of Lazarus, was mixed. Some put their faith in him; but some did not, and they went off to the Pharisees and reported what he had done. A meeting of the Jewish Council was quickly convened. Something had to be done. 'This man,' they said, 'is performing many signs. If we leave him alone like this the whole populace will believe in him. Then the Romans will come

and sweep away our temple and our nation.’ In the eyes of the Priests and Pharisees Jesus was certainly a blasphemer, claiming to be the Son of God, but John makes it plain that his real offence was to threaten the survival of the Jewish religion and the Jewish nation.

John will not let us believe that Jesus was just a miracle-maker who went around doing good, like a non-judgemental social worker. John makes it plain that Jesus raised some very basic questions about the foundations of the Jewish nation; fundamentally he challenged its racial and religious exclusivity. As we shall see on Palm Sunday, he made his challenge clear when he drove the traders out of the Temple. God is not just the God of the Jews, he said; God is the God of all nations.

Not surprisingly, his picture of God also presented a fundamental challenge to accepted ideas. Contrary to the established view, Jesus taught that God was closer to the poor and the outcast than he was to the Pharisees who prided themselves that they kept the religious law in its every particular. St Paul, the best-known of Jesus’ converts, was a Pharisee. Before his conversion he prided himself in just that way, he had kept all the rules; after his conversion he counted it all as so much garbage. The Priests and the Pharisees did not see Jesus as a do-gooder; they saw him as a dangerous subversive.

It is easy for us who know how the story ended to condemn the Priests and the Pharisees. I’ve often wondered how I would have responded to Jesus had I been one of the crowd, or even a priest, in those days. I hope I would have seen the light, but I fear I would not. The gospel is not just the story of Jesus, it is the story of us all in every age. Nations and factions convinced of their racial and cultural superiority; leaders concerned for the national interest – which turns out to be identical with their personal or party interest; the crowd drawn by the spectacular, fascinated by celebrity, but in the end convinced by neither; religious people wanting to be left to do what they have always done, resisting the new, even when they sense it might fulfil their hopes. But John’s purpose is not to write a social commentary; his purpose is to bring about faith. At the end of his gospel he says he has written ‘in

order that you may hold the faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through this faith you may have life in his name.' John sees very clearly that Jesus came not to judge the world but to save the world.

John calls to us over the centuries: Don't make the same mistake as the Jews of Jesus' day. Don't walk blindly up the dead end of racial and religious exclusivity: you can see where that gets you in Kosovo or Ulster. Don't be corrupted by the deceits of the age: look what is happening to your children. Don't harden your hearts against the truth, even if it shakes your certainties to the core: look at what has happened to Jerusalem. Don't run away from conflict. When the truth confronts falsehood conflict is inevitable, but God is in the conflict. Trust God. Let your hearts be warmed and your minds renewed by what he has done; read his signs and believe. His own did not receive him, but to all who did receive him he gave the right to become children of God.

John's central conviction in telling the Passion story is that God is in control. In plotting Jesus' death Caiphas thinks he is saving the nation, the chosen people; he is not. In reality God was at work offering his Son so that all his peoples might be saved. You may find it hard to see God in this, says John, but so did those who were closest to Jesus at the time. They were not always deeply convinced, but even so the faith which they did have was the raw material of something deeper. We are just the same; faith comes bit by bit, and following the events of Holy Week has been for me an important way in which my faith has grown deeper.

So for now, after the raising of Lazarus, Jesus withdraws to Ephraim where he stayed with his disciples. He does this not to escape, but to ensure that he will eat the Passover with his disciples in Jerusalem. Next week, when the time of the festival has come, he returns to Jerusalem knowing that he is a wanted man. He comes freely as the Son of God, embracing a high and inescapable destiny.

## 2. SUPPER AT BETHANY

READ: JOHN 12.1-11

*Mary brought a pound of very costly perfume...and  
anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped them with her hair.*

John's ordering of his story is designed to bring out the meaning of the events as they unfold, and this means that his order sometimes differs from that of the other three evangelists. John places the story of the supper at Bethany immediately before the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and he does so because it provides a meaningful prelude to the final part of his Gospel.

John is precise about the timing: six days before the Passover Jesus returns to Bethany to visit Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary. This, evidently, is some time after he had raised Lazarus from the dead. As he journeys he knows that the authorities are out to seize him; coming to Jerusalem is a courageous acceptance of danger. It is not surprising that before confronting that danger Jesus should want to be with a family whom he loved, and with whom he had shared both grief and joy.

John says that Lazarus sat among the guests with Jesus, so it seems likely that the supper did not take place in the home of Lazarus and his sisters, but the actual place is not recorded. What is recorded is that during the supper 'Mary brought a pound of very costly perfume, pure oil of nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped them with her hair, till the house was filled with its fragrance.' This story exists in several versions, and in all of them this action is greeted with disapproval. John that Judas was indignant at the sheer extravagance of the act: 'Why was this perfume not sold for thirty pounds and given to the poor?' It is a natural reaction; many Christians voice it when the church proposes to embark on some expensive project, like refurbishing the organ, which

seems to ignore other, more altruistic claims on its money. Jesus rebukes Judas: 'Leave her alone. Let her keep it till the day she prepares for my burial; for you have the poor among you always, but you will not always have me.'

Mary's action is an overflowing expression of love and gratitude. She has good reason to be grateful to Jesus: he restored her brother to the family; and if, as in some versions of the story, she is to be identified as the woman taken in adultery (or even as Mary Magdalene), her reasons for gratitude are even greater. But even so, such extravagant acts of devotion make others feel uncomfortable and disapproving – perhaps we wish that we could feel so deeply, or that we could be more abandoned, and resent those who do. Our measured, middle-of-the-road approach to religion does not help, stressing duty more than devotion. William Temple commenting on this story says our spiritual life is often stunted because we give so little place to gratitude. To the worldly, costly acts of devotion are foolish. As Judas says – and it is perhaps not without significance that it is Judas who says it – the money would be better spent on the poor. Jesus' rebuke shows that even excess has its proper place. There is a service higher than that of the poor: the worship of God. Jesus accepts that extravagant devotion has its place in worship, and it is worship, which ensures that hearts are opened to hear God's demands for justice, that truly ensures that the poor are properly served.

But it may not have been only the excess of Mary's action which caused discomfort; perhaps also the very physical nature of her devotion was hard to accept. Not only did she wash Jesus' feet, she wiped them with her hair. This is a sensuous, intimate act. Why couldn't she be like her sensible sister Martha whom, John records, served at the supper. Love is shown in service, and we can assume that Martha's service was precious to Jesus, but love needs to move beyond providing for material needs to meeting emotional needs. It is a cold love that only provides material needs, and the beloved may want to scream out: 'Don't just provide for me; show me; touch me; hold me, caress me.'

Mary's caress is her way of saying that she has heard and believed what Jesus said when he raised her brother from the dead: 'I am the resurrection and I am life.' It is not only out of gratitude that she acts, but also out of faith. Not only does she believe, she *knows* that Jesus is the Son of God. Her excessive, beautiful, intimate caress expresses her faith. She knows the fate that must await him, and she anoints him for his burial.

---

### 3. THE KING COMES IN PEACE

READ: JOHN 12.12-19

*The great body of pilgrims...took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessings on him who comes in the name of the Lord! God bless the king of Israel!'*

There is nothing in John's story of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem about the cleansing of the Temple, which, according to the other Gospel writers followed immediately after his arrival at the Temple. If we want to find the cleansing in John we have to turn back to the beginning of his Gospel, to chapter 2. John places it at an earlier Passover festival which took place after the wedding in Cana of Galilee. Why does John place this incident here? He does so because the cleansing of the Temple sums up the whole theme of the Gospel story: Jesus came to cleanse and purify the religion of Israel.

Temple worship was strictly for Jews; at the entrance to the inner court there was a notice which said Gentiles entered on pain of death. This exclusivity was reinforced by the rule that only special Temple money could be used to buy animals for sacrifice. By driving out the traders and money-changers Jesus challenges the whole culture of religious and racial exclusiveness. What Israel has received from Yahweh is not for them alone but for all nations.

But John adds to the story. He says that Jesus drove out the *animals* as well as the traders and money-changers. The animals were there for sacrifice. Their blood was offered in expiation for sins. Jesus drove them out too and was left standing alone in the Temple court. This is a deeper challenge. He is saying to Israel: Your whole way of approaching God is wrong. The blood of animals won't atone for your sins; only God can take away sins. I am his Son; I am the one true sacrifice. The old temple of animal sacrifices must yield to the new Temple and the One, true sacrifice. Placing this story at the beginning of his gospel, John makes plain that the challenge to cleanse and universalise their religion was in Jesus' very coming. It did not arise over time as Jesus' ministry progressed.

At the end of the gospel Jesus enters Jerusalem for the last time, and this triumphal entry was also heavy with meaning. He came riding on an ass, acting out the prophecy of Zechariah: 'Fear no more, daughter of Zion; see your king is coming, mounted on an ass's colt.' When a king entered a city on a horse it was a sign of hostility; when he came on an ass it was a sign of peace. Jesus does not enter Jerusalem like a liberator — ancient or modern — supported by his guerrilla army, but riding on an ass, surrounded by the pilgrims who had come up for the festival. 'Fear no more ...' the words would have been recalled by the Pharisees who knew their Scriptures, and Jesus' meaning would not have been lost on them. For all the power of his challenge, Jesus came in peace.

But John makes another important addition to the story. He alone mentions that the people took *palm* branches as they went out to meet Jesus. The last time this had happened was one hundred and fifty years

earlier when the Jewish hero Judas Maccabaeus entered Jerusalem at the end of the Jewish revolt against its Greek rulers, and cleansed the Temple from the gentile yoke. Judas was received 'with praise and palm branches, and with harps and cymbals ... with hymns and with songs.' Judas had won his victory by force of arms, Jesus will win his victory through the offering of his own life. Judas was hailed as the saviour of the nation; Jesus will die as the saviour of the world. Something greater than Judas Maccabaeus is here.

As Jesus rides into Jerusalem with the people shouting *Hosanna!* he knows it is for the last time. Many times he has warned his disciples, but they have not understood, just as John says they did not understand the significance of riding on an ass until after he was raised. But the authorities understood. They feared for the future of their religion and their nation, and Jesus posed a fundamental choice - a choice was between two ways in which the life of Israel as the people of God could be perpetuated: by military power or by the way of peace; by insisting on their racial and religious exclusivity, or by making the Temple a house of prayer for all nations.

It is tragic that over the centuries the situation has not changed. Zionist Israel faces the same choice today - and so do we. It is easy to point the finger at Israel and forget the Crusades, the Reformation, and the wars fought over two millennia in the name of Christian power, and which are still being fought today, not to mention the inability of Christians to live together in peace. The challenge of Palm Sunday is to every claim of racial and religious power and status made in the name of God.



## 4. THE GREEKS SEEK JESUS

READ: JOHN 12.20-36

*Among those at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip and said to him, 'Sir, we should like to see Jesus.'*

This episode is a typical Johannine piece in which the two parts of the conversation never quite seem to meet! The Greeks may well have been converts to Judaism or, more probably, enquirers. They want to talk to Jesus – maybe to find out whether Judaism, which they are thinking of embracing, is really all that it is cracked up to be. They go to Philip, one of the apostles with a Greek name. He seems a bit unsure about approaching Jesus, so he in turn asks Andrew, who also has a Greek name. Andrew has no hesitation, and they go off to find Jesus.

The Greeks do not just want to look at Jesus, they want to talk to him. We say, 'Can I see you?', when we want to talk to someone. 'Seeing' imports the idea of a conversation. The Greeks are searching; they want to see what Jesus has to say face-to-face before deciding whether they can believe in him. John leaves it unclear whether they did have their conversation with Jesus – he says that only Philip and Andrew spoke to him. Jesus responds by pointing to what he has to do – to die – and adds that those who wish to follow him must take the same path: 'The man who loves himself is lost, but he who hates himself in this world will be kept safe for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; where I am my servant will be.' In other words, if you want to see me you must do as I do; then not only will you see me, you will be in fellowship with me.

It is the same idea as that in the parable of the Sheep and the Goats. At the Last Judgement the people will be separated into two groups as a shepherd separates his flock into the sheep and the goats. The sheep are welcomed into the kingdom because they have served the poor and the

outcast. In serving them they have served Jesus. The point is clear: Jesus is served, and thus seen, in the hungry, the thirsty, the naked and the imprisoned. This service may well call for deep personal sacrifice. To make his meaning plain, Jesus uses the image of the seed. A seed cannot remain a seed if it is to perform its intended function of bringing forth new life. It must die; it must give up the life that is in it before it can bear a rich harvest. In the parable of the Sower Jesus spoke about the seed which fell in good soil and brought forth thirtyfold, sixtyfold, an hundredfold; here he says what must happen to the seed before it yields its harvest: it must die.

It is possible that the Greeks did have had their conversation with Jesus because his reply would have made sense to them. The image of the seed was familiar to the Greeks. The law of life through death was accepted as a natural fact, and was used in the Greek Mysteries as a ground of hope for a future life. Jesus takes this idea and gives it an added spiritual depth. The Greeks had not seen the link between the dying seed and self-sacrifice. The Greeks saw self-sacrifice as something that might be necessary, and those who were capable of it were praiseworthy, but its moral value was not perceived. Although the Greeks had a highly developed sense of justice, they had not gone beyond justice and affirmed that love was the supreme good; and they had not seen that self-sacrifice, the highest expression of love, is the highest form of action. Jesus tells the Greeks that sacrificial love is the life of heaven.

But Jesus is not talking about philosophy; he is talking about reality, a reality which he must undergo; and the agony of that reality now seizes him: 'Now my soul is in turmoil, and what am I to say? Father, save me from this hour. No, it was for this that I came to this hour. Father glorify thy name.' John does not recount the agony in the garden, but the same anguish is here: 'now my soul is in turmoil'. Jesus is the seed which must die before it can bear a rich harvest. While John makes plain that Jesus is in control of events, and that he accepts his imminent death, it is clear that his obedience is a soul-shaking sacrifice.

If the Greeks do put their faith in him, Jesus is telling them something important about discipleship. Those who truly follow him, who lose their lives for his sake, can expect their souls to be shaken too. Christians often fail to make this connection when trials of faith come. 'Why did this happen to me?' we ask. The answer is that it happened to you because it happened to him. Anyone who sets themselves 'to fight against evil and follow Christ', as it says in the Baptism Service, are deluding themselves if they expect a quiet life. Whenever we fight for the good or the truth we can expect opposition from the forces of evil.

Some years ago now I spent a retreat at the monastery at Crawley Down. One of my fellow retreatants told me that the monks often experienced spiritual violence, and that one of them had found himself thrown out of bed one night. A major part of their vocation was to do spiritual battle with the forces of evil; those forces are real and they fight back! There was a time in the Richmond Deanery in Surrey when most of the clergy were feeling very tired and dispirited. It was in the midst of the very materialist period in the 1980s, when the church was trying to say there was an alternative to the policies then being pursued. The evil forces released by those policies were fighting back, and we were being attacked. Christians who oppose the spirit of the age can expect a tough time. Dom Helder Camara, the former Archbishop of Recife in Brazil, said when I feed the poor they call me a saint, when I ask why they are poor they call me a communist. Today, the church has had little public thanks for its insistence that there is a higher authority than the self; it is regularly derided in the press, some of the 'cover' being simply offensive. It is easy to be discouraged. But the church's witness can be effective as the campaign to remit the unpayable debts of the poorest nations shows; even so progress is slow, and the campaign continues to attract opposition. True discipleship is a soul-shaking experience.

The voice from heaven says that Jesus will be glorified. This is John's way of speaking of Jesus' death; it will be his glorification, the crowning of all that he came to do. Death as glory is a hard image, but it is central to John's Gospel. The Temple will not become a house of prayer for all nations simply by removing the Jewish bits like the special money and

the animal sacrifices; it requires a new beginning, a death and resurrection of the old into the new. This is exactly what is about to happen on Good Friday, says St John, and it will be glorious.

Much of this was lost on the Jews – and probably on the Greeks too! Maybe it is lost on us as well. All of us, Jews, Greeks, Christians, are reluctant, unable even, to let go of our basic ideas. The Jews don't want to let go of their idea of the Messiah: 'Our law teaches that the Messiah continues for ever. What do you mean by saying the Son of Man must be lifted up? What Son of Man is this?' Our religious ideas are often the most resistant to change. Jesus may have performed mighty miracles, but even so the people are unwilling to let what they have seen and heard change their minds. This is no more than John has made plain at the outset of his Gospel: 'He came to his own, and his own received him not.' So Jesus went away from them into hiding, not to escape, but to ensure that the time of his death and the harvest which it will bring is the time of God's choosing. His hour was upon him.

---

## 5. THE GATHERING DARKNESS

READ: JOHN 12.37-50

*In spite of the many signs Jesus had performed  
in their presence they would not believe in him.*

‘Trust to the light while you have it, so that you may be children of light.’ With these words Jesus withdraws into hiding; the darkness is gathering. He knows the fate which awaits him; he knows that he is going to die, but it will be at the time of God’s choosing, and not that of the authorities. It must be at the Passover itself, for he is the true Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. As Jesus waits for the festival to begin, John reflects on the reason for the apparent failure of his ministry among his own people.

He begins with the scriptures. John believed that God had revealed his truth to his prophets, and that the disbelief of the Jews was precisely what had been foretold by Isaiah: ‘Lord, who has believed what we reported, and to whom has the Lord’s power been revealed?’ (*Isaiah 53.1*) Disbelief, says John, should occasion no surprise, it is exactly what we have been led to expect. This disbelief is not a considered response, a view arrived at after a careful and sympathetic weighing of the evidence, but a wilful refusal to go where sense and sight lead – as Isaiah says, a deliberate blinding of the eyes, a deliberate dulling of the mind in order to avoid confronting a difficult and challenging truth. (*Isaiah 6.9-10*)

Facing the truth can be hard; we all know this. We have all closed our eyes and ears against what we know to be true simply because we can’t face it. Maybe we can’t accept the loss of face that acknowledging that we are wrong would entail, but more often it is because the truth which we cannot face requires us to reassess the basic assumptions upon which our life rests. This sort of problem often comes when we are faced with

'home truths' by family or friends or colleagues close to us. It is a phenomenon well known to psychotherapists, much of whose work is concerned to help people correct false self-images which are stunting their growth into mature adults. But it is much more widespread. Nations have ways of understanding themselves which may rest more on fantasy than truth. The technical term for such understandings is 'myth'. In this sense a myth is the story which a nation or people use to interpret their experience. Revising these myths is difficult and painful, as the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa showed, but that was what Jesus was challenging the Jews of his time to do.

The myth through which the Jews interpreted their experience was that of being God's chosen people, which they understood as a something which set them apart from the other nations. For a brief period in their history under King David they had been the dominant power in the middle east, and looked forward to the time under 'great David's greater son', as the hymn puts it, when God would restore their fortunes, and they would again be the dominant power, or at least independent. The Messiah was expected to be a military leader who would free Israel from the foreign yoke. This myth was a selective reading of history – as all national myths tend to be – and ignored in particular the prophets, like Isaiah and Jeremiah, who looked at things rather differently. Isaiah, for example, saw Israel's calling as the people of God in terms of being the servant of the nations rather than their master. It is not surprising, therefore that the first Christians when they searched the scriptures for ways of interpreting their experience of God in Jesus were drawn to the passages in Isaiah which spoke of the Messiah as the suffering servant. This was so far removed from the official view that most people simply could not accept it.

The power of such myths should not be underestimated; they are still very much in evidence. The myth of racial superiority is one example. We have lived through the Holocaust and appalling acts of ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, Rwanda, and indeed in Israel itself, which are

legitimised by this myth. The murder of Stephen Lawrence and countless other racial crimes, are all motivated by this myth.

The myth of racial superiority is a salvation myth: the promised land will be ours if we can rid ourselves of all who defile it. It is the same sort of thinking which motivates dangerous sects and cults, like the Movement For The Restoration of the Ten Commandments in Uganda. But there are far more powerful salvation myths at work in today's society. The belief that all our problems will be solved by scientific and technical progress is one. While our survival does depend on scientific and technical progress, it depends on much else besides. Not everything that has value for human life can be weighed and measured – love is, of course, the best example. Scientific progress has been dazzling, miraculous even, but as the concern over gene technology shows, from GM crops to human cloning, we may not want the salvation it offers.

Perhaps the most powerful salvation myth today, though, is the belief in economic progress. Economics is the new theology, providing the basic understanding of modern life; we hope for economic miracles and we look for economic salvation. But those miracles have turned out to be illusion, and that salvation has never dawned. Economic growth has not brought us to the promised land; it may have increased wealth and brought many material benefits, but it has also brought the biggest gap between rich and poor in the history of the world with all the resulting social problems. Economic salvation may be heaven for the rich, but its hell for the poor.

The problem of failing to heed the signs and see the truth was not confined to the Jews of Jesus' day. It affects and afflicts us all. John's explanation is simple: those in authority who believed in Jesus would not acknowledge him on account of the Pharisees, for fear of being banned from the synagogue. 'For they valued their reputation with men rather than the honour which comes from God.' The same is true of our modern myths. Challenges to them are met by blinded eyes and dulled minds. We do not want to hear other views; our investment in the myths of the age is just too great.

People often find it hard when the church questions the myths we live by. Sometimes we are accused of being unpatriotic, more often simply of being out of touch. But our allegiance is not to the myths of the age but to Jesus who is the light of the world. The contrast between light and darkness is an image used by John to represent the radical choice that Jesus sets before us. To be with Jesus is to dwell in the light; he came to enlighten us. His concern is not to condemn those who cannot face the truth, but to enable them to see the error of their ways, and repent so that they can walk in the light. This, says John, is, and always will be, the mission of God; it is the labour of love: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who has faith in him may not perish but have eternal life. It was not to judge the world that God sent his Son into the world, but that through him the world might be saved.' (*John 3.16, 17*) And towards the end of the Gospel we see the same insistence again: 'I have not come to judge the world, but to save the world.' But, of course, judgement is a unavoidable consequence of Jesus' presence. Light cannot but show up the darkness, even though the purpose of God's judgement is not condemnation but salvation.

We are those who have promised to turn to Christ, and the essence of the life of faith is learning to see the world as God sees it, letting his light flood it. This will undoubtedly mean trying to resist the myths of the age. Salvation comes not through military might, racial purity, scientific progress, or free market economics. The Christian witness has been important in persuading the world of the evil of war and racism; perhaps we are beginning to persuade the world that, as John V. Taylor memorably said, 'Technology is safe only in a context of worship. Science should walk hand in hand with sacrifice.' I think also, people are beginning to realise that economics must be reconnected with ethics. God looks to those who have turned to Christ to sit light to the myths of our time; to open our eyes, to enlighten our minds, to help the world turn to him and be healed. To that world Jesus now returns. He has spoken to it God's eternal truth; he must now offer himself for it as God's eternal sacrifice.

## 6. COMMUNION & BETRAYAL

READ: JOHN 13 & 18.1-27

### THE LAST SUPPER

*Jesus knew that his hour had come and he must leave this world and go to the Father.*

John has come to the end of the first part of his Gospel, and now begins the second. He has told of the coming of the word made flesh, who came to his own, and his own received him not. His glory was made manifest in a great series of signs, ending with the raising of Lazarus. Now his glory is to be displayed no longer in signs but in the reality which the signs have signified, the death and resurrection of the Son of Man.

The first sign – the turning of water into wine at the wedding in Cana – had made it clear that the ritual of the Jewish religion could not suffice to bring about a community that could really be the People of God. It was only through the death and resurrection of the Son of Man that such a People could be born. In his other signs Jesus has shown that he is indeed that Son, and now in this final episode the whole of Israel's history is to be gathered up and fulfilled. It is both humiliation and glory; defeat and victory; death and resurrection.

The whole story, John says, is one of love – the love of God for his people – and now, in this final episode he is to show the full extent of his love. And as before, the people will respond differently: some will see it as the proper execution of a blasphemer, others will see it as a transcendent event in which the Son of Man gives his life for the salvation of the world.

And so Jesus comes to the Upper Room to share his last supper with his disciples.

*He poured water into a basin, and began to wash his disciples feet and to wipe them with the towel.*

John's account of the Last Supper differs from that of the other gospel writers. There is no account of the meal and the words which Jesus spoke as he blessed the bread and the wine; instead John recounts another incident, the washing of the disciples' feet.

The context of this seems to be a dispute among the disciples about precedence. Luke says that a jealous dispute broke out: who among them should rank highest? In response Jesus rebuked them, reminding them that the ways of the world were not the ways of the Kingdom. He came among them to serve, and not to 'lord it' over them. (*Luke 22.24,25*) John records a similar saying: 'You call me "Master" and "Lord", and rightly so, for that is what I am. Then if I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. I have set you an example: you are to do as I have done for you.' But more than this, John makes it clear that Jesus matched his words with his deeds.

The washing of the feet, the menial task which was performed by a servant for the guests as they arrived for supper, is a lesson in the dignity of the Kingdom. Jesus wants to show what true kingship is like — indeed more than this, what true divinity is like. How does he do this? asks William Temple. Does he order a throne to be placed that he may receive the homage of his subjects? No, he rises from table, lays aside his garments, takes a towel, ties it round him, pours water into a basin, and begins to wash his disciples' feet, and to dry them with the towel. This is God the servant of whom Isaiah spoke. This is God showing the full extent of his love.

At the supper at Bethany we thought about the discomfort felt when Mary washed Jesus' feet. Devotion to God can be taken too far; now we have a picture of God's devotion to us. How does it makes us feel? Maybe we shrink from the whole idea of a God who humbles himself in our service. We are ready, perhaps, to be humble before God; but we do

not want him to be humble in his dealings with us. Maybe we should feel more comfortable if God were more majestic.

It was certainly too much for Peter. He protests: 'You Lord, washing my feet? ... I will never let you wash my feet.' Even after three years of close companionship with Jesus, Peter has not really understood what Jesus is about. If we want to be in fellowship with God we have to learn that we shall not achieve this by what we do for him, but by what we let him do for us. William Temple puts it this way: 'Every disciple begins by wanting to give service. No doubt it is wise that the Church should provide opportunities for this. But every disciple needs to learn that their first duty is to let Christ serve them.' Real growth in Christian discipleship comes through letting God wash us. He makes us clean by his word and his sacraments. The Eucharist, which is the memorial of this Last Supper, is for our cleansing. It is, says Temple, precisely our unwillingness to let God cleanse us that 'may make us enemies and traitors while we are still in the company of his friends. We may go to Church and say our prayers and read our Bibles; the cleansing word of God flows over us; but if our hearts are closed we are not cleansed. And the Lord knows the man that is betraying him, perhaps before that man knows it himself.'

But John's story has a yet deeper meaning. Jesus says to Peter, 'If I do not wash you, you are not in fellowship with me.' Like the water at the wedding in Cana, the water of the foot-washing symbolises the purification brought about by Jesus' death. Jesus is the door of the sheep-fold; it is through him that we enter into communion with the Father; it is by his death alone that we enter into communion with God. As Jesus said, 'No man comes to the Father except through me.' The way to heaven is to let God wash us and make us new.

## IT WAS NIGHT

The first move of the powers of evil comes from within the circle of companions which Jesus has chosen. Judas was not an infiltrator, but one of those chosen personally by Jesus; he says, 'I know whom I have chosen.' At the beginning of his gospel John has told us that Jesus knew what was in a man. He saw Nathaniel under a fig tree and said, 'Here is an Israelite worthy of the name; there is nothing false in him.' What did he see in Judas?

Maybe he realised that Judas was a risk, a man perhaps heedless of his own safety, who would give all to the cause, but whose zealotry was not matched in equal measure by judgement. In the end any cause would do, so long as it promised adventure and struggle. Whatever he had seen in Judas, John says the moment of greatest distress for Jesus is when he realises that it is one of his chosen friends who was to betray him: 'Jesus exclaimed in deep agitation of spirit. "In truth, in truth I tell you, one of you is going to betray me".' It was this more than the taunts and threats of the Pharisees and High Priests and the brutality of the soldiers, which disturbed his spirit. But even betrayal has a part in God's plan; Jesus has to be handed over. Judas was chosen but unfaithful; he has been washed but he has not allowed himself to be cleansed; he will hand him over.

The supper had begun before nightfall, but as it ended darkness had fallen. Leaving the Light of the World, Judas goes out into the darkness.

It was night.

## BETRAYAL IN GETHSEMANE

*Jesus, knowing all that was coming upon him, went out to them and asked 'Who is it you want?' 'Jesus of Nazareth', they answered.*

*Jesus said, 'I am he.'*

The walk from the Upper Room to Gethsemane takes about three-quarters of an hour. It is down-hill all the way, and the last part is quite steep and rocky. When I walked it in January 1988 it was raining and we arrived soaked. At the time of the first Easter it is likely to have been dry but cold, and with the full moon of the Passover overhead. I can see Jesus and his disciples making their way, in groups of two or three, the column gradually becoming strung out. The atmosphere must have been heavy with foreboding, their fears for Jesus mixed up with their fears for themselves. Was this the end? What would become of them? Why had Judas left early? What was he up to? What had Jesus been on about when he gave him the piece of bread at the supper?

Judas had been making his preparations, and had left early to give the signal to act. Nothing had been left to chance: he had assembled a large force, and, despite the full moon, they came with lanterns and torches, and weapons too. Clearly there had been some prior negotiation with the Romans because the temple police were accompanied by a cohort of troops. Who on earth did they think they had come to seize? The size of the force shows just how big a threat Jesus was felt to be. Judas may have set it up, but the drama unfolds he is pushed to the background. He has done his work; the Priests have no further use for their informer. John tells us merely that Judas the traitor stood with them; there is no greeting, no kiss.

John's conviction that God is in control shapes the way he tells the story. It is Jesus who dominates the encounter. He doesn't wait for them to come near, he goes out to them and asks, 'Who is it you want?' The reply has overtones of abuse and contempt, 'Jesus, the Nazarene.' (Nazarene carried the same overtones as the abusive term 'nigger'.) Words are easy; insults come cheap; but courage is another matter. When Jesus

replies 'I am he', they draw back and fall to the ground. Maybe the awful nature of the deed they have come to do convicts them.

'I am he.' The last of the great *I AM* sayings. When Moses asked God his name the reply was a mystery: 'I am who I am.' As John's gospel unfolds it becomes clear that in Jesus we experience the mystery in human form. Seven times Jesus says *I AM*: I am the bread of life; I am the light of the world; I am the good shepherd, I am the resurrection and the life ... .. And now simply, 'I am he.' The overtones with the divine name must have pierced their hearts. No wonder they fell back.

Jesus repeats his question and the police repeat their answer, this time perhaps with less contempt. Remaining in control, Jesus secures the safety of his companions and then gives himself up to arrest. Clearly something greater than betrayal is going on here.

As the Passover lambs are being prepared for sacrifice, so the Son of God prepares to sacrifice himself for the sins of the world. It is all too much for Peter who strikes out with his sword – a futile gesture if ever there was one. Jesus rebukes him and heals the injured man, Malchus. No one, not even Peter, can fight the Lord's battles; this only Jesus can do. He says to Peter, as he says to all who have taken up arms for the faith, from the crusaders to the catholics and protestants of Ulster and the orthodox of Kosovo, 'Sheathe your sword. This is the cup the Father has given me; shall I not drink it?'

## AT THE HOUSE OF ANNAS

*They took him to Annas... The High Priest questioned  
Jesus about his disciples and about what he taught.  
Meanwhile Simon Peter stood warming himself...*

Having secured Jesus, the authorities are now in a hurry. They want to bring him before Pilate at the earliest possible time for the death sentence to be legally passed, so that the crucifixion could be carried

through before the start of the festival at dusk. The earliest possible time was the beginning of the fourth watch of the night. (The third watch of the night was called the 'Cock-crow' watch. It ended at 3.00 am, and the cock-crow to which Jesus referred at the last supper was the trumpet call which sounded at this time marking the end of the third watch and the beginning of the fourth.)

The need for haste means that due process will have to be sacrificed. An informal inquiry takes place before Annas to find evidence which can be presented to the Sanhedrin at first light, and the case sent on to Pilate. Only a charge of sedition is likely to carry weight before Pilate. And so Annas asks Jesus questions about his followers and about what he taught. Annas is fishing, hoping Jesus will say something which will condemn him. We have all seen the technique in police dramas on TV. Jesus knows what Annas is up to, and he knows that the rules are being ignored. He does not answer but challenges the procedure: 'I have spoken openly to all the world ... I have said nothing in secret. Why question me? Ask my hearers what I told them; they know what I said.' The proper procedure was to frame a charge and call witnesses. But that is not the way those in power deal with enemies of the state. Too much openness will reveal too much truth; it has to be done behind closed doors. Again we have seen it; it is the standard behaviour of every corrupt regime. The irregularity of the proceedings is shown by what happened next: Jesus was struck on the face. This would have been impossible in open court; but behind closed doors casual violence is possible – 'The prisoner fell down the stairs.'. Jesus remains in control, and reminds his abuser that his action is illegal. Their haste has got them nowhere; Jesus is sent away bound.

While all this is happening in the house there is another trial going on outside. Peter has followed Jesus, and is brought into the courtyard by another disciple, probably John, who is acquainted with the High Priest. The maid on duty at the the door, who knows that the other disciple is a follower of Jesus, asks Peter 'You are not also one of this man's disciples,

are you?' The question invites the answer 'No', and Peter gives it. Later on around the fire the question is repeated, again inviting the answer 'No', and Peter again gives it. And then the question comes the third time, but this time in direct form: 'Did I not see you in the garden with him?' Peter has to reply, 'No!'

In their less calculating way the the servants have used the same technique on Peter as Annas used on Jesus. As the question is pressed Peter feels the ground slipping away under his feet. He cannot stand where he said he would, and he is lost in denial. Anyone who has found themselves in a 'tight spot', and has seized an unexpected opportunity of escape will recognise what has happened to Peter. Had he been faced with the direct challenge first he would probably have answered 'Yes'. He might have been abused or suffered ridicule, but nothing more than he could handle; but offered the chance of avoiding trouble he took it. But succumbing to that temptation was fatal. The path to betrayal began with the fear of ridicule.

---

## 7. CRUCIFIED UNDER PONTIUS PILATE

READ: JOHN 18.28-19.37

### BEHOLD THE MAN

*They shouted, 'Away with him! Away with him!  
Crucify him!' 'Crucify your king?', said Pilate.  
'We have no king but Caesar', the Jews replied.*

It is about 3.00 am. The Cock-crow watch has just ended and the Early watch has begun. This is the earliest hour at which a man can be sentenced to death. There are lots of people about. Clearly things have been well prepared. The guards have brought Jesus to the Praetorium. The accusers are ready to present their case, and, even at this ungodly hour, they have assembled a crowd of their supporters. Pontius Pilate knows what is expected of him – he had already provided troops for the arrest – and is ready to hear the case before dawn.

The proceedings begin, but these are not *normal* judicial proceedings. Pilate does not take his seat on 'The Pavement', the proper place for the court to convene; he does not hear evidence, charge and counter-charge; instead he moves back and forth, in and out of the Praetorium, between Jesus and the Priests, trying to establish just what is the complaint against Jesus; why, precisely, is he being asked to put this man to death?

He is forced to do this for two reasons. First, because the Jews refuse to enter the Praetorium – to enter a gentile house would mean ritual defilement, and would debar them from eating the Passover. Second, because the Priests refuse to state a charge against Jesus – Pilate had been expecting a charge of sedition; instead they try to pressurise him: 'If he were not a criminal, we would not have brought him before you.' No wonder he treats them with contempt. The Jews appear more concerned with their own religious scrupulosity than with the due process of law, and to cap it all, they expect him simply to be a rubber stamp for their

decisions. The result is a power-struggle: Pilate uses his authority to humiliate the Priests; they use the threat of violent unrest to force him to do what they want. Pilate insists that there is no case against Jesus. The Jews demand that Jesus must die because he claimed to be the Son of God. Pilate refuses to give way. The Jews accuse him of being no friend of Caesar. Pilate still resists, and taunts them bringing Jesus out and saying, 'Here is your king'. The Priests, driven to fury, shout back, 'We have no king but Caesar'. This is close to blasphemy. Israel has always insisted it had no king but Yahweh; the Priests forswear Yahweh in order to secure the death of his Son. Pilate has publicly humiliated them as the price of giving in to their demands. John says by now it was mid-day. The power-struggle has lasted nine hours.

Jesus is the victim of this struggle. It is his life that is being judged; but John shows him as the one who is really in control. Inside the Praetorium another struggle is in progress, between Pilate and his conscience.

Pilate's conscience is not refined. He can descend to barbarism, after all he had Jesus flogged even though he believed him innocent – an outrage against justice – but killing an innocent man is another matter. He knows he must concede to the Priests, but he must have a defensible reason for doing so. He adopts the same fishing tactic as Annas, asking Jesus, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' Jesus rebuffs him, saying his kingdom is not of this world; had it been so his followers would have been fighting to save him from arrest. Pilate senses an opening; he asks, 'You are a king, then?' Jesus remains in control: "'King" is your word. My task is to bear witness to the truth. For this I was born; for this I came into the world...' Pilate does not want to hear what his inner voice is telling him, and responds with a profound but dismissive question, 'What is truth?' Pilate is not really interested in truth, and he can only avoid the fact that the truth stands before him by widening the conversation, turning from the personal to the abstract.

However, Jesus has made a deep impression on Pilate. He wants to release him, but he is not strong enough to do it without popular

consent; he proposes a deal: let Jesus be released under the Passover amnesty. The deal is rejected, but it adds to the pressure on the Jews to say what their real charge against Jesus is, that he said he was the Son of God.

Pilate's conscience is now even more troubled. He is not religious, but neither can he reject religion. Like many today he is trapped, and what passes for religion in his life is more superstition than faith. What if there is a God? What if this man is God? All the deep questions which his Roman pragmatism has been able to avoid now well up to confront him. Returning to Jesus he asks, 'Where have you come from?' To this Jesus gives no reply. It is *the* question at the heart of John's gospel. It is the question which can only be answered in the depths of one's heart; Jesus cannot answer it for Pilate – nor can he answer it for us.

Pilate may not know the answer, but he does know that Jesus is innocent, and from that moment, John says, Pilate tried hard to release him. But in the end his concern for himself and the need to preserve order change the moral agenda. Pilate abandons his attempt to do justice and instead seeks a way out which he will be able to defend. Maybe, after all, the Jews have some substance to their charge of sedition. If Jesus did declare himself to be the Messiah, bearing in mind the welcome he received on Palm Sunday, all might be lost. Better to have him put away.

It is a familiar situation; countless leaders have faced the same need to compromise their conscience, and countless ordinary people too. We are all Pilate. Neither he nor the Priests were evil men. In their own way they sought to do what they believed to be best. Sometimes good men are driven to evil by their good intentions, the end justifying the means. This is the everyday reality of sin; not deliberate and evil wrongdoing, but moral compromise, the pragmatic adjustment of truth to expedient, of principle to policy. For this Jesus died.

So, his efforts to release Jesus having failed, Pilate at last takes his seat on The Pavement and hands him over to be crucified.

## CALVARY

*When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.'  
Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.*

'Jesus was now taken in charge...' The way to Calvary would have been through the narrow, dark, alleys of ancient Jerusalem to the Gate of Ephraim, and then out to a small rise in the ground outside the city walls. A crowd would have gone with him adding humiliation and abuse to the burden of the heavy cross that Jesus was bearing.

After he had been nailed to the cross and lifted up, gradually the crowd would have dispersed. They had seen what they wanted, they had better things to do than to watch him die – after all, it could take hours. After a final dispute about the wording of the charge on the cross, Pilate and the Priests depart; Pilate relieved to be rid of the Jews and their incomprehensible religion, the Priests, careful to have avoided defilement, to celebrate the Passover. As they celebrate how God saved them from slavery in Egypt, so the Son of God offers his life to save the world from the slavery of sin.

Jesus is left alone with the soldiers guarding him and a few of his closest companions, including Mary his mother and John himself. The truth which John stated in his Prologue is now brutally displayed: 'He came to his own, but his own received him not.'

Three times John says that what happened took place in order that the scriptures might be fulfilled. On Calvary we see the end of the story of the People of God, the end that has been foretold in the scriptures. John sees the Cross as the seventh of his seven signs. Beginning with changing of water into wine at Cana, feeding the five thousand, giving sight to the man born blind, raising Lazarus from the dead... Jesus has performed signs revealing his glory, and now on the cross we see the last sign to which all the others have pointed. Isaiah was right; God does not save by conquest but by love, by taking upon himself the burden of our sins:

‘Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases ... he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment which made us whole, by his wounds we are healed.’ (*Isaiah 53.4,5.*)

This is God at his closest. This is the work of love; the way of peace is the way of forgiveness. Jesus has foretold this moment; he said when he be lifted up he would draw all the world to himself. John sees it as Jesus’ glorification: ‘A grain of wheat remains a solitary grain unless it falls to the ground and dies; but if it dies it bears a rich harvest.’ It is Jesus’ death which is atoning: ‘He bore the sins of many and interceded for their transgressions.’ (*Isaiah.53.12*) We have seen the sins which Jesus takes to the cross as this holy week has unfolded, and they are our sins too: shallowness as disciples; failings in generosity; false hopes for salvation: racial, military, scientific, economic; acts of betrayal and violence; moral compromises and failings. As St Paul wrote to the Corinthians, by the Cross God has made the wisdom of the age look foolish:

‘Jews call for miracles, Greeks look for wisdom; but we proclaim Christ - yes Christ nailed to the Cross; and though this is a stumbling-block to Jews and folly to Greeks, yet to those who have heard his call, Jews and Greeks alike, he is the power of God and the wisdom of God.’ (*I Cor. 1.23,24*)

Even as he dies Jesus brings his ministry to its conclusion; he gives Mary into the care of John. By this he shows that the People of God will now find their true destiny in the community of his disciples; Christianity is the fulfilment of Judaism. But the future indicated by Jesus is not one of conquest or persecution; it is to be that of mother and son, a blood tie, the old yielding to the care of the new. As his physical body dies, so Jesus creates the community, the Church, which is to be his new body in the world. But we still have much to learn about how to be the Body of Christ, as our relationship with the Jews over the centuries has tragically and terribly made plain.

This last act completed, Jesus bowed his head and gave up his spirit. Even of his dying John uses the active verb: Jesus gave up his spirit. His

life is not taken, but given; not sundered, but surrendered. As he dies he conquers; accepting death he vanquishes it. And as he dies Jesus cries, 'It is finished': all that the prophets had foretold, all that the Father had sent him to do; the power of sin is broken; the world overcome.

It is finished.

---

## 8. WAITING

READ: JOHN 19.38-42

*In the garden there was a new tomb, not yet used for burial.  
... There they laid Jesus.*

In 1991 I went to Cape Town to visit my sister who was living there. In one of the art galleries there was an exhibition of etchings by Rembrandt. One of them was of Jesus being carried to the Tomb. Rembrandt showed four men carrying Jesus on a stretcher, two of whom, I imagine, were Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. The tenderness of this final act of devotion was quite beautiful; the bowed heads of the bearers spoke of their grief and communicated itself to you. I looked at this picture for a long time; it was very moving.

Death rarely fails to move us, and we take great care to make sure that all the right things are done when someone has died. It would be hard to live knowing that we had failed to offer this final act of tender service as well as we could. Sometimes it is a way of making amends for the love we failed to show and the service and we failed to give, while

they were alive. It may have been that something like this motivated Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. John tells us that Joseph had been a secret disciple for fear of the Jews, and Nicodemus had first approached Jesus by night. Perhaps they both had too much to lose if their discipleship had become known. Now Jesus has died he is no longer a threat to the nation, and they can show their attachment without fear. They cannot bear to see the body of the Lord dishonoured, and being men of means, they can at least ensure that in death he is properly cared for. Showing the courage which they could not when Jesus was alive, they prepare his body for burial and lay him to rest.

John says that this happened at the end of Good Friday; he omits all mention of Holy Saturday. Jesus rested in the tomb; it was a day of waiting. Guards waiting for their duty to end. Women waiting to return to anoint the body. Disciples waiting behind locked doors for fear of the Jews.

We have a low estimation of waiting. Waiting is passive, inactive, frustrating; waiting is to be avoided! But all our activity just covers the fact that deep down we are all waiting ... for pain to heal, for memories to pass, for something to turn up, for our deepest questions to be answered. Perhaps we are really waiting for God, and on this day he keeps us waiting.

The Bible is full of activity and drama, but it is also a long story of waiting: a story of a People waiting for the Messiah, of holy men and women waiting for the new age to dawn, of zealots waiting for their land to be freed from the hated Romans. There is often a restlessness in waiting, and we tell stories to help the time pass, stories that encourage us that our waiting is not in vain. And so as we wait for the Lord, in the great Easter Vigil we listen to some of the stories from the Bible which encourage us to believe that our waiting is not in vain.

We hear again how God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, through which he formed his chosen people. We hear Isaiah's wonderful vision of the steadfastness of God, the One whose purposes never fail. We hear Ezekiel, waiting in exile, as he prophesies over the

dry bones which become in his vision a great and mighty host. These stories gives us hope; they sustain us as we wait. They remind us that God can be trusted even if we cannot see what he is doing; that he can bring new life where all seems lost.

Stories form us; they help us to know who we are, where we have come from, and what we might hope for. Holy Week is about retelling the story which has made us what we are. We become part of the story and our waiting becomes part of the waiting of the people of God. It is in the story and in the waiting that we find our truth. Like a story, truth has an open texture like love, it invites us to explore its depths, it resists being projected into certainty.

Waiting may seem passive, but in it God is active, moving the story on. There is an ancient belief that between his death and resurrection Jesus descended into hell – its part of the Apostles' Creed. He harrowed hell, freeing its souls from the power of evil and breaking their bonds. Here is a graphic picture of the triumph of light over darkness, an affirmation that God's salvation is not limited in time or space. Of the truth of this we cannot tell, nor do we know how the resurrection was accomplished; all we know is that it happened and that God accomplished it while we waited. In the waiting between Good Friday and Easter Day the truth occurred.

Waiting is important; it is about being faithful; it leads us into a deeper sense of meaning. Waiting is a creative use of time. So while Joseph and Nicodemus perform their final act of love, we wait trustfully for God.



## 9. NEW DAWN

READ: JOHN 20.1-18

*Jesus said, 'Mary!' She turned to him and said, 'Rabbuni!'*

This is surely the tenderest moment in the gospel story. Mary Magdalene has come to the tomb early in the morning, perhaps to pray, perhaps to see if there is some last act of service she can offer to the one to whom she owes so much. Her grief turns to anguish when she finds the tomb unsealed and the body missing. Turning away, she sees a man before her, but does not recognise him. He asks her, 'Why are you weeping? Who is it that you are looking for?' Thinking he must be the gardener, she asks if he knows where Jesus' body has been laid. Jesus said, 'Mary!' How must she have felt to hear her name spoken by the familiar voice that she thought she would hear no more. She turns to him, and through her tears – joy and disbelief now overcoming her grief – she says to him, 'Rabbuni!', 'My Master!'. The encounter is unbelievably tender. She can hardly believe it; her mind and heart must have been in turmoil; she does the most natural thing, she reaches out to touch him, to know that he is really there. Jesus says, 'Touch me no more.'

Titian's painting *Nolle Me Tangere* shows the scene. Jesus stands with Mary kneeling at his feet, her arm stretched out towards him. Jesus' body is arched, his head inclining towards her, his body moving away. In contrast to Mary, who kneels on the earth, he stands on fresh green grass, a symbol of new life. '*Nolle me tangere*', 'touch me no more': it is not a rebuke for Jesus both moves away from and leans towards Mary in a gesture aching with tenderness. She has seen and believed.

But seeing is not always believing. As we have journeyed through Holy Week we have noticed that some who saw Jesus believed, and others did not. Jesus had performed many signs, which everyone acknowledged as miraculous, but not all saw the reality to which they

pointed, namely that he was the son of God. The contrast is there in John's account of the first Easter morning: Peter went into the empty tomb, he saw there was no body and the grave clothes lying there, but he drew no conclusion; John then went in too, 'and he saw and believed'. It was at this moment that John came to belief in Jesus as the Son of God. The gospel says he did so because he realised that this was what the scriptures had led him to expect.

The difference between those who see and believe and those who do not is about whether or not we are willing to be led by our experience. When John saw and believed it was no blind leap of faith, but the realisation that all that he had seen of Jesus in the flesh was confirmed by what he now saw. He took the final step from fact to faith. The one who had turned the water into wine, who had fed the five thousand with five loaves and two fishes, who had calmed the storm with a word, who had given sight to a man born blind, who had raised Lazarus from the dead, and who know had overcome death itself, must indeed be the Son of God. Faith is the willingness to follow where sense and sight lead; faith is about seeing with the inner eye. Anyone who loves knows what faith is, for love is an act of faith. There is no evidence by which love can be proved, there are only signs and experience which say, 'I love you'. To believe this is to see with the inner eye.

The resurrection is above all the work of love, and a sign that love will never end. As Richard Harries says, it is God's unqualified seal of approval on all that Jesus was and stood for. The authority by which he taught, his claim to forgive sins, his special care of the lost and outcast, his relationship of a son to the Father – all this is shown to be grounded in God himself. The resurrection does not make these things true, they were always true. The resurrection is the clearest demonstration of their truth. St Paul said there are three things that last for ever, faith, hope and love; the resurrection confirms our faith, renews our hope, and warms our love.

Mary had good reason to love. It is said she was the woman taken in adultery. Jesus had forgiven her, set her free and given her a new life.

Her experience of forgiveness led her to believe in Jesus; maybe like Peter she had not quite worked out the full truth, but when he spoke her name, 'Mary', it all came flooding into place. He had said, 'I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me.' The good shepherd knows his sheep by name and they know his voice. Mary hears her name and she knows who speaks; she responds, 'Rabbuni!', which means teacher or master, but was used almost exclusively of God. Mary now sees more than Jesus, she sees him as God. But now she may not touch him. In the past she has served him, but now she has another task, she must take the news to the other disciples, and through them to the world. The forgiven sinner is the first to be commissioned as a witness to the resurrection. 'Touch me no more': Mary will now have to love Jesus as God rather than as a man. And Titian sees with his inner eye that as Jesus commissions her he aches with tenderness. He must leave her, because only his absence will make a deeper faith possible, and to witness to the resurrection will bring suffering to the one he has healed.

We have all been commissioned in the same way; God has called us by name, poured his renewing water over us and sent us out to live and work to his praise and glory. Easter is *the* time for new Christians to be baptised and sent out as witnesses. It is the day on which all Christians renew their baptismal promises, recalling that moment when God called us by name as he called Mary. In those promises we profess the same faith that came to Mary and John on that first Easter Day. To follow Jesus, to let our faith grow, we need to learn like Mary and John to see with our inner eyes, and to follow where sense and sight lead. This is the path of glory. Not everyone who saw Jesus believed in him, but, says John, to those who did he gave the right to become children of God. That is our right, and in God we rejoice.

Christ is risen, alleluia! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!