

Holy Week & Easter at Christ Church Meditations and Homilies

“Be It unto Me According to Thy Word”



The Annunciation, c. 1450, Fra Angelico

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2018

“Be it unto me according to thy word”

Which word? “*Hosanna*” or “*crucify*”? Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week, a week in which we immerse ourselves, especially in the classical Anglican understanding, in all four Gospel accounts of the Passion. These are further complemented by important and intriguing lessons and epistles as well as by the Office Readings of this week. To attend to these readings is to fulfill the Marian definition: “*be it unto me according to thy word.*”

Today is *Palm Sunday* but in a kind of providential wonder it is also *The Feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary*; though the celebration of that feast is deferred until after Easter on April 10th. As Luther notes, “*Mary does not want us to come to her but through her to Jesus.*” For over a millennium and a half, March 25th marked the beginning of the year, a year which is constructed entirely around the story of Christ: his coming to us, his going from us; his being with us. Aspects of that sensibility are readily apparent. We call the ninth month of the year, *September* which actually means the seventh month; the tenth month, *October*, means the eighth month; the eleventh month, *November*, means the ninth month; the twelfth month, *December*, means the tenth month. All of this makes sense when you realise the significance of March 25th as *The Feast of the Annunciation* and therefore as marking the very beginning of the Incarnation of Christ. Nine months from today will be Christmas.

The Angel Gabriel’s salutation to Mary and her active acquiescence to the will of God as the God-bearer, or *Theotokos*, marks the radical moment of the Incarnation. Her Annunciation is his conception, humanly speaking, in her womb. That it seems to contradict the natural order of things is precisely the point. God is the God of nature but that does not tie him down to nature; in his sovereign freedom he acts in other ways not to destroy nature but to perfect nature. In a way, there is nothing more fitting than the concurrence of Mary’s *Annunciation* with *Palm Sunday* and *Holy Week*.

Through Mary’s ‘yes’ to God at the *Annunciation*, Christ has “*tak[en] to himself our flesh, and by his incarnation [has made] it his own flesh*” *ha[ving] now of his own although from us what to offer unto God for us*” (Hooker). Without that understanding, Christ’s Passion, Death and Resurrection are utterly meaningless, a gruesome tale of cruelty and wickedness but of no redemptive truth or value. In a way, the whole history of the development of the Canon of the Scriptures and the Creeds, the whole history of the Church, arises from pondering on the mystery of Christ’s Passion and seeing in it the utter goodness of God and his will for our humanity.

To be defined “*according to thy word*” then, is the Lenten project wonderfully concentrated in the heart-breaking accounts of the Passion. Christ’s words, to be sure, are front and centre, but there are also the vast array of our words in all of their confusion and uncertainty, in all of their violence and disarray. We have to attend to all of them but only because Christ is present in all of them although in different ways.

We are *in* the spectacle of Holy Week, *in* the events of the Passover journey, *in* the events that belong to the Way of the Cross. We are *in* all of the crowds, *with* all of the actors, but, above all, we are there *with* Christ. In a way, that will perhaps be the hardest part of

Holy Week: to be with Christ as he suffers the madness and the folly of our words and actions unleashed upon him with such violence and fury. We confront ourselves but even more we encounter Christ for us and in us. Yet that will be our comfort, our strength. *"God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have eternal life."*

It all seems rather melodramatic, you might be thinking. How does any of the story of Christ really relate to me? Think again. This is nothing in this story that does not relate to you and me in our inner disorders, anxieties, self-presumption, indifference towards others, and to the care of ourselves, let alone our anger, our lusts, our passions and desires which, unleashed or not, wreak such havoc in our souls and lives. There is nothing melodramatic about Holy Week; it is simply the drama of redemption, the drama of the heart and core of the Christian faith. To enter into Holy Week is to participate in the redemption of our humanity accomplished by Christ. It is accomplished by our being with him. That is the great challenge of Holy Week.

We learn more about ourselves and about Christ in his sacrifice for us. What we learn about ourselves is already wonderfully embraced in the liturgies of *Palm Sunday*. We go from the cries of *"Hosanna"* to the shouts of *"Crucify."* These are our words that reveal our contradictions. This completely counters every aspect of Maritime religion, the religion of sentimentality and self-righteousness, the two sides of the same debased coin of religion. Our hearts are to be moved, yes, even to tears; yes, but in true contrition and confession seeking more and more to be embraced in the redemptive love of Christ. That is not sentimentality; it is not about how we are feeling in our emotions; it is about the truth of Christ's passion felt in us as truth. This checks the nonsense of any kind of self-righteousness which is nothing more than feeling good about ourselves and superior to others. That is not Holy Week. Nor is it true.

Holy Week confronts us with ourselves in the contradictions of our sins. That, paradoxically, is the good news, if we can learn from what we see and hear in the pageant of Holy Week. If we can, it will be because we are willing to be like Mary and be defined by God's Word, his Word audible and visible, in Word and Sacrament. Then, and only then, will we begin to be who we are in Christ.

This will be the case for all of us but it will have a particular dramatic form for us at Christ Church as Jen and David Appleby proceed through the Passion of Christ towards Easter and their baptisms at *Easter*, and then confirmation and first communion on *The Octave Day of Easter* when Archbishop Ron Cutler will be with us. We will be journeying with them in their journeying with Christ and into Christ, into their incorporation into the body of Christ. Baptism and Communion make no sense apart from the drama of Holy Week. It is all about our being in Christ and he in us.

We behold our inconsistencies and contradictions but in the greater spectacle of the constant and all-surpassing love of Christ. Here is the great comfort of the Christian Faith. It is concentrated for us in *"the most burning love of the Crucified"* (Bonaventure); for in Christ's suffering we suffer and yet find our truest comfort. Such is the spiritual wisdom of *The Comfortable Words* in the Literature of Consolation. *"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners,"* as Paul reminds us. We are those sinners who find their

comfort in *"Jesus Christ the righteous"* who *"is the propitiation for our sins,"* as John emphasizes. *"Come unto me all that labour and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you,"* Jesus tells us. Refreshed? Only because *"God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have eternal life."*

Christ is God made man through the heart and womb of Mary that he might have of us through her what to offer unto God for us. The intensity of the Passion belongs to the increase of joy in us. *Palm Sunday* marks the beginning really of one long continuous liturgy that brings us to *Easter* and to *Eastertide*. We know the story abstractly, it seems, but to feel it and to be in it, this is the great project of Holy Week. *"Draw near with faith."* Embrace it, pray it and feel it!

"Be it unto me according to thy word"

Palm Sunday, 2018

“Be it unto me according to thy word”

Again which word? And which word will be the word of comfort to us on *Monday in Holy Week*? Yet, Hosea bids us “*take with you words and return to the Lord.*” “*Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ saith unto all that truly turn to him.*” So we are being turned but only to confront our afflictions; our sufferings are born in him. “*In all their affliction [our] he was afflicted,*” Isaiah proclaims. “*In his love, and in his pity, he redeemed them.*”

Such is the power of love even in the face of our unloveliness. From the intensive reading of *St. Matthew’s Passion on Palm Sunday*, we turn to *The Passion According to St. Mark* on the Monday and the Tuesday of Holy Week. It begins with “*an alabaster box of ointment of spikenard, very precious*”, broken open by a silent and unnamed woman and the ointment poured out upon his head. It ends with the tears of Peter confronting his betrayal of Christ. And in between? The spectacles of betrayal beginning with the Last Supper, the agony of Gethsemane, the kiss of Judas and his being taken captive and the interrogation at the hands of the high priest. All pretty intense.

All our noisy, busyness, and bother circle around the quiet steadfastness of Christ which stands in stark contrast to the discord and disarray of our human emotions. In one way or another our animosities and interests are all directed at Christ. Only the broken alabaster box of ointment and the tears of Peter remind us of love learned and expressed through our encounter with Christ. The unnamed woman’s act is spoken against by others, thinking it a waste of the ointment, to which Christ memorably replies. “*She hath wrought a good work on me: for ye have the poor with you always, and whensoever ye will ye may do them good; but me ye have not always. ... she is come aforehand to anoint my body to the burying.*” And the tears, too, are tears of repentance and that is a great good.

In both instances and throughout this part of Mark’s *Passion* we are caught up into the swirl of emotions that attend profound events. Everything here is seen through through the words of Christ which challenge our interpretation and understanding. We confront aspects of ourselves in our thoughts and actions against one another and in the folly of our own self-certainties; from those who question the woman’s action to Peter’s moment of self-realization. He has followed him afar off but when challenged about being “*with Jesus of Nazareth*” denies that he even knows him. “*The second time the cock crew. And Peter called to mind the word that Jesus said unto him.*”

Jesus explains the action of the unspeaking and unnamed woman; Peter recalls the word which Jesus had said to him. In his *Passion* we encounter the Word and Son of God. How will we respond? In love and loving action, in tears of repentance and sorrow? Or in stubborn denial and indifference? With the silent, unnamed woman and with Peter we see something of what is wanted in terms of our response. It is to be like Mary for that is to be turned wholly to Christ.

“Be it unto me according to thy word”

Monday in Holy Week, 2018

“Be it unto me according to thy word”

Somehow out of the spectacle of violence and cruelty a good and great word emerges. Not from within Israel but from the centurion present at the awful events of the crucifixion itself. Christ, in Isaiah’s words “*neither turned away back*” but “*gave [his] back to the smiters*”. He endures the shame and the spitting, the cruel actions that belong in one way or another to all of us. He does so in Isaiah’s vision out of trust “*for the Lord God who will help [him]*.” Not us, it seems.

At this point in *The Passion According to St. Mark*, we can only behold what human sin and wickedness accomplishes, *on the one hand*, and what comes out of that spectacle, *on the other hand*. We go through the gruesome charade of his trial before Pilate and Pilate’s betrayal of his own truth and conscience, being “*willing to content the people*,” the mob, that is to say, and so releasing the murderer Barabbas and delivering Jesus into our hands of vicious violence. We witness the mocking and the scourging of Christ at the hands of the Roman soldiers in the *Praetorium*. Thus Jews and Romans have their hand in this outrage but only to make us realize our place with them.

There is no one to help. No one to stop the horror. Even the cross bearer, Simon a Cyrenian, is *compelled* to carry his cross. And even as crucified, we cannot let him alone, but are in the crowd of the passers-by who mock and deride him along with the chief priests. It is an ugly, ugly scene which reveals the ugliness of ourselves both in our thoughts, our words, and our deeds. And that is the point.

Out of the intensity of this scene comes one word from Christ, the great and troubling yet profound word, the cry of dereliction. At once quoting the very first verse of Psalm 22, it is a prayer. Not to the Father, but to God. It is as if the horizons of our lives have narrowed down and there is an eclipse of any personal relationship. In the agony of the crucifixion, he cries out “*My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?*” It is the only word from the Cross that is a question. Yet questions belong to our acknowledgement of truth. His word is a prayer to God, a prayer that as a question reveals the utter intensity of the Passion and its truth. This is not play-acting. It is suffering in its truest and deepest form: the sense of utter abandonment and loneliness.

Christ voices what belongs to all of the lonely sufferings of our world and day. But he voices it to God and that makes all the difference. The Centurion senses and knows this, seeing somehow a great good that emerges out of such a great horror. His word becomes our word; “*Truly this man was the Son of God.*” He gets it. Will we?

“Be it unto me according to thy word”

Tuesday in Holy Week, 2018

“Be it unto me according to thy word”

Shadows are a feature of Luke’s account of the Passion and complement the ancient service of *Tenebrae* on the *Wednesday of Holy Week*. It is a largely the psalm offices of the *Triduum Sacrum* sung in anticipation of the three great Holy Days of *Maundy Thursday*, *Good Friday*, and *Holy Saturday*. Through the psalms in particular there is a kind of shadowing forth of the events of the Passion and their meaning.

The Psalms are the Prayer Book and Hymn Book of the Church. How to read them? How to pray them? Sometimes as the words of Christ to us; sometimes as our words to God; sometimes as our words of violence and vengeance. Yet the psalms help us to enter more fully into the Passion of Christ. They are super-charged with a feeling intensity and a deep insight into both human character and God. Their intensity is complemented by *The Beginning of the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ According to St. Luke*, and especially, it seems to me, the scene of Christ’s agony in Gethsemane.

Luke looks at things in a more inward way. He provides us with an imaginative feel for what is going on inside the heart of Jesus. With Luke, more than any of the Evangelists, we feel the Passion of Christ. “*Being in an agony, he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.*” It is a most compelling and powerful image that suggests something of the mind of the Evangelist, the mind of Luke, who is so powerfully moved by the scene itself. He paints a picture of the agony of Christ.

It is Luke, too, who gives us an even more intense understanding of the Peter’s betrayal of Christ. “*The cock crew,*” Luke tells us in an economy of expression. “*And the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter.*” It is an exquisite moment. What is the look? A look of contempt, of judgement, of despair? No. I think it is the look of loving compassion. “*For this is a true saying, and worthy of all to be received, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.*” Peter, remembering the word of the Lord and so confronting his threefold betrayal, himself as a sinner, “*went out and wept bitterly.*” Just so do we learn how to be defined by the word of God. Sometimes it is through our tears. Discovering something of the deep love of Christ in the shadows of our lives. We see “*in a glass darkly*” but at least we see. Here is a look that springs from the heart of Christ in his suffering for us.

“Be it unto me according to thy word”

Wednesday in Holy Week, 2018

“Be it unto me according to thy word”

And so it begins. The *Triduum Sacrum* are the three great holy days of the Passion in which we seek to immerse ourselves or be immersed in the Passion of Christ; in short, to be defined by the word of God. That has meant confronting all of our words of disarray, our words of sin and evil, *in* the words of Christ, especially the words of Christ crucified. Luke gives us three of those words: Christ’s first word from the Cross, “*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do;*” Christ’s response to the penitent thief that “*today shalt thou be with me in paradise;*” and, what is taken as the last word from the Cross, “*Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.*” With Luke we have the first and last word of the crucified, a beginning and an ending with a prayer to the Father. Such is the wonderful intimacy of Luke’s Gospel. He is, as Dante understood so well, *scriba mansuetudinis Christi*, the scribe of the gentleness of Christ.

Maundy Thursday is a day rich in ceremonial and symbolism. We recall tonight not just *The Passion According to St. Luke* but the Last Supper of Christ with his disciples and with all of its gentle intensity. “*He carried himself in his own hands,*” Augustine wonderfully suggests. Christ puts himself into our hands and we are left to our own devices. We betray him and crucify him. But he carries himself in his own hands and provides another way for us to be with him and for him to be with us. He provides the way in which his sacrifice on Calvary will both be remembered and participated in through the sacraments.

Baptism and the Eucharist are the two dominical sacraments. Out of the wounded side of the crucified Christ flow the sacraments of the Church, as the Fathers often said; water and blood, baptism and communion, respectively. It requires a holy remembering on our part, a *sacramentum memoriae* that connects the sacrament with its meaning. It is both sign and thing signified. “*This is my body ... This is my blood. Do this in remembrance of me.*” “*Go forth and baptise.*” These are not maybe’s but must be’s. It is what is required of the Church.

Sacrifice and service are the dominant features of the *Maundy Thursday* proliferation of rites: the foot-washing, the King’s ‘healing’ touch and alms to the poor and sick; the Last Supper itself; the Stripping of the Altar. Everything anticipates and yet participates in everything that will happen tomorrow. Here the events begin to unfold that give meaning to the term ‘*passion.*’ He wills to be acted upon, to be placed in our hands. Left to ourselves we learn what that means. Only then do we, perhaps, grasp the significance of the sacraments which he institutes for us; what he has provided for us in spite of ourselves. He carries himself in his own hands so that he may give himself for us and in us. The sacraments are the effective signs of grace; they are what they signify, “*the powerful instruments of God to eternal life*” (Hooker). They belong to the meaning of *Maundy Thursday*, the day of the *mandatum*, the new commandment.

And what is that new commandment? “*That you love one another as I have loved you.*” On *Maundy Thursday*, we see the love of Christ for us, anticipating his Passion and death and providing us with the continuing means of his being with us and our being with

him. He who carries himself in his own hands in the bread and wine as his body and his blood carries us into himself.

No words, perhaps, are more compelling and defining for the Christian Church as the body of Christ than the words of sacramental institution, words which are repeated and commanded, words which effect what they signify in conjunction with the natural elements of bread and wine as Christ's body and blood. *"This is my body ... this is my blood. Do this. Drink this."* These words that signify so much of the reality of Christ's presence and sacrifice all belong to the commandment to love one another even as Christ has loved us. They are the very words of love made audible and visible in Word and Sacrament. They are words which define us.

"Be it unto me according to thy word"

Maundy Thursday, 2018

“Be it unto me according to thy word”

But which word? There are seven after all, the seven last words of Christ from the cross, words which define us in relation to God in Christ.

On *Good Friday* we contemplate Christ crucified. Through the Passion accounts of *Matthew*, *Mark*, and *Luke* we have pondered something of the mystery of the crucifixion that brings us to this moment itself as seen through the eyes of *John*. All four Gospels contribute to our remembering the Passion.

Such remembering is absolutely central to Christian Faith and Christian life. Why? Because comfort, our consolation and blessedness, is entirely found in the meaning of Christ’s sacrifice and suffering for us. *Good Friday* means that it is good for us to behold the one whom we have pierced, to draw upon the passage from *Zechariah* that *John* himself uses. “*They shall look on him whom they have pierced.*” For “they” read “we.”

To what benefit? What good is there for us in looking upon the crucified? To behold ourselves in our sins and wickedness is a great and necessary good. Our sins are the immediate cause of his Passion. But there is something more. The good for us is to behold the love of God in Christ crucified. No symbol, no sign is more powerful, more effective really than this at signifying the divine love for our humanity precisely in the horrifying spectacle of our humanity’s attempt to annihilate God from the horizon of our lives. The deep meaning of *Good Friday* is that we kill God. God is dead, dead in the crucified Christ, the one who is God and man. He has “*borrowed a body that he might borrow a death*” (Athanasius); our body, our death. But he is God made man. In Christ, God dies for us.

There can be no greater good, no greater paradox than the overcoming of our deaths by the death of Christ. What does it mean? It is the death of death. On *Good Friday* we behold death as the consequence and meaning of human sin and wickedness. We behold what our rage and spite accomplishes - death. We see exactly what happens when we are left to “*the devices and desires of our own hearts.*” We see our nothingness. This and this alone is the great good of *Good Friday* because only so can we see the greater goodness of God.

We can only call this day *Good Friday* if we begin to get this point, the point that only God can bring good out of evil. Our good on *Good Friday*, however much we assume the Resurrection, is to behold the death of God in the Crucified, pure and simple. What we see is our evil writ large but we see that as willingly borne in the body of the crucified. Our sins are made objective to us. This is the take-away point here, a point illustrated wonderfully in *John’s Gospel*. “*And I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me*” (John 12.32), a passage which in turn looks back to where Jesus recalls an important image from *The Book of Numbers*. “*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life*” (John 3. 14,15).

What is the reference? It has to do with the journey of the Hebrews in the wilderness of Sinai under the leadership of Moses. That is a journey of learning, learning how to be the people of God as defined by the Law of God and learning how to live from what

God provides. Not easy lessons. True to form, *“the people became impatient on the way ... and spoke against God and against Moses.”* There you have it in a nutshell.

In speaking against God, we are calling God not good but evil. *Good Friday* compels us to contemplate these contradictions within ourselves by seeing them made objective in Christ crucified. In *The Book of Numbers*, the people whine and complain, *“why have you brought us up out of the Egypt to die in the wilderness?”* They unleash a battery of complaints that are really based on the assumption that God exists for us and for our sense of what is good. Do for us, God, what we want for us. This is not the same thing as *“be it unto me according to thy word”* or *“not my will but thy will be done”* or *“thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”* No. This is to defy and deny the goodness of God, effectively calling good evil.

In *Numbers*, the divine response is tough and immediate but instructive. *“Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.”* This prompts an immediate about face and the people come to Moses in a kind of contrition. *“We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord.”* They ask Moses to intercede to God for them. The Lord responds by bidding Moses make a fiery serpent out of bronze and set it upon a pole so that *“every one who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.”* The point is clear. They are to look upon their sin made visible in the bronze serpent, the externalization of their sinful disobedience.

John draws upon that imagery. Christ crucified draws us to himself in a deeper understanding of our sins and its meaning. It means death. It is made visible in the death of Christ. Only in seeing that and contemplating our sins can we possibly hope to live and be healed. That is *Good Friday*. It is the meaning of the Comfortable Words too. Here is our *“refreshment,”* here is *“eternal life,”* here is salvation for *“sinners,”* and here is *“the propitiation for our sins.”*

Sin alienates us from God and from one another. We cannot make ourselves right with God; we can't undo what has been done and we can do no good thing of ourselves. We can only contemplate our evil but in so doing we are being turned to the greater goodness of God. He makes it possible for us to behold him crucified. That is the greatest good of this day, *Good Friday*. Look and be saved. How? By being convicted of our sins and foolishness. He who knew no sin bears all sin. He who cannot die dies and so death itself dies. Christ's sacrifice makes us one with God; it overcomes the self-willed separation of our sins. One of the Scriptural anthems for *Good Friday* recalls the last of the Comfortable Words, reminding us that *“herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and send his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”* It makes sin and death nothing and so we are made one again with God. *“By his stripes we are healed,”* as one of Isaiah's suffering servant songs reminds us. Our sin and death die on the Cross in the Crucified. All because of God's love of his own absolute goodness.

The radical teaching here is that Christ bears all sin past, present and future in his crucifixion and as such overcomes all sin. God in Christ allows our humanity to have its way even to the point of annihilating God. Only so can we discover the utter folly and nothingness of sin and thus the greater power and goodness of God. Only through the death of death. And so all the words of the Cross bring us to the one word which carries

them all. Mary's *"be it unto me"* at once anticipates and participates in Christ's word of agony, *"not my will but thine be done,"* a word which belongs to the last word of the Crucified, *"Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."*

The radical meaning of Holy Week is that everything is gathered into the relationship of the Son to the Father in the Holy Spirit. Everything is returned to God. Sin is the perversion of the good. In contemplating Christ Crucified we see not only sin and evil but the greater goodness of God. In bearing all sin and death, all sin and death is overcome. Such is the goodness of the love of God.

We hang upon the words of the Crucified, upon all the words of the Passion. Only so will be like Mary.

"Be it unto me according to thy word"

Liturgy of Good Friday, 2018

“Be it unto me according to thy word”

Mary’s fiat, her “*be it unto me according to thy word*” has provided the mantra for our Holy Week meditations on the Passion of Christ. Now all is done. All is at peace. Christ lies in the tomb, a borrowed tomb at that. It is finished. *Holy Saturday* recalls the sabbath rest of God in the *Genesis* accounts of creation. All we can do, it seems, is rest ourselves in the peace of this moment to ponder the mystery of human redemption.

The trauma and the horror of *Good Friday* is past and there is that sense of psychological release in us, perhaps, that gives way to a contemplative possibility in us to think about what Christ’s Passion and Death mean. *Holy Saturday* provides us with that possibility now become our necessity, the necessity of trying to make sense of it all. The word that we wait upon is the word of Christ in the tomb, the word in death. *Holy Saturday* emphasizes the reality of the death of Christ at the same time as it points to the power of the divine word. The word that defines our contemplation is perhaps, Peter’s word, drawing on Zechariah’s imagery, that “*he went and preached unto the spirits in prison.*”

The Epistle from *1st Peter* reflects on Christ’s death in terms of the Noahic Covenant which is extended to become a simile for Christian baptism. Wonderful but what is going on here in this extended Scriptural reflection? What is the underlying insight? It is simply this. *Holy Saturday* reminds us of the radical meaning of human redemption accomplished by Christ’s death on the Cross. It is universal; it is for all. God seeks the reconciliation of the whole of our sinful humanity. This provides a necessary counter and check on our all-too-human judgements about one another as to who is saved and who is not. Not for us to know anything more than the Comfortable Word, that “*God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have eternal life.*”

“*Look to Jesus,*” Calvin tells us, “*he is worth to me more than a thousand testimonies.*” He is our predestination. Human redemption is about the divine love of God’s own truth and righteousness that cannot be contained or constrained to the limits of finite reasoning, to the realm of the temporal, the world of past, present, and future. No. It is all about how time is gathered into eternity and itself is nothing more than the moving image of eternity, to use a famous Platonic image taken up by the metaphysical poet, Henry Vaughan.

Here on *Holy Saturday*, our good is to contemplate that Word going forth and preaching to the souls in prison, a lovely image captured in the icon of the Resurrection in the Eastern Orthodoxy where Christ is depicted as drawing Adam and Eve out of the grave. Such is an image of human redemption. Nothing is but what is in God. The Scripture readings of *Holy Saturday* point us to the hidden actions of God’s Word and Son. God’s rest is not our rest, a kind of doing nothing. It is activity, the pure activity of God as God drawing the whole of his sinful humanity back to himself.

The Gospel, to be sure, hints at the disorders of human activity. On the one hand, we see the touching actions of Joseph of Arimathea about the burying of Christ, itself a work of

corporal mercy that is enjoined upon all of us with respect to the death of stranger and loved one alike; on the other hand, there is already at work the conspiracy theory that will see the resurrection as a kind of conjuring trick, the body being stolen away by the disciples. Thus, we have in the Holy Saturday Gospel one of the earliest testimonies to an important part of the narrative, the sealing of the tomb with a great stone and the setting of a watch.

But *Holy Saturday* in its peace and quiet has already alerted us to the eternal motions of the Divine Word and Son, going and preaching to the souls in prison, in Hell, in Sheol, in the place of the dead, to use the various terms and images that belong to the creedal doctrine of *The Descent into Hell*. The point is clear. Nothing lies outside of the embrace of God's desire to be reconciled with the whole of his sinful creation. The Crucifixion is that reconciliation but it has to be communicated, has to be made known. Thus the Word is ever in motion in spite of us. This is the good and the comfort of *Holy Saturday*. Here is the peace which Christ brings, a peace which passes human knowing. It recalls the original harmony of Paradise. All is done. All that there is for us is the true meaning of Paradise, to rest in the sabbath rest of God, to contemplate the peace of God towards us.

"Be it unto me according to thy word"

Holy Saturday, 2018

“Be it unto me according to thy word”

Our Easter Vigil is a greatly simplified version of the ancient liturgies and rites of “*this most holy night*.” Vigils are about watching and waiting. As such they are about anticipation and expectation for something more. Holy Week has immersed us in the Passion of Christ, using Mary’s *fiat* as our mantra to enter into the narratives of the Passion; “*be it unto me according to thy word*,” the word which has gathered into itself all of the madness and disorders of our words. But in so doing we have been aware that we are participating in something great and wonderful, something which belongs to the mystery of human redemption.

That mystery recalls us to the deeper meaning of God’s creation. We can only participate in the Passion through the Resurrection. For here is the great wonder. It is the Resurrection alone that makes our participation in the Passion both possible and necessary. Tonight we wait expectantly and profoundly upon the mystery of God in the fullness of redemption. We await the new creation, the Resurrection.

How do we watch and wait? First, in the quiet darkness in which the Paschal Candle is blessed and lit and the great prayer, the *Paschal Praeconium* or *Exultet*, is sung, itself a wonderful and moving set of Scriptural and theological images about the Resurrection, sometimes attributed to St. Augustine. It is really a kind of Eucharistic Prayer or Canon. It proclaims the triumph of light over darkness, of life over death, of good over evil. Then, we listen to a few of the great prophecies and readings that illumine the mystery of human redemption. That prepares us for an important feature of the Vigil.

Traditionally, the service provided the occasion for baptisms, indeed, in its fullest expression, there was baptism, confirmation and then communion. In the baptisms at the Vigil, there is the renewing of our baptismal vows. In other words, there is a constant circling back and into the mystery of our incorporation into the Body of Christ.

Our country vigil ends with the lauds or praises of Easter morn. Our vigil brings us to the Resurrection, to the Alleluia’s that resound in praise and thanksgiving to God. The Resurrection is the triumph of good over evil, the triumph of God himself in his very truth and being giving himself for us in the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. Such is the word heard and seen that defines us, Word and Sacrament through which we participate in Christ.

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Easter Vigil, 2018

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What is that word? It is all Resurrection. *“Christ is risen, Alleluia, Alleluia. The Lord is risen, indeed, Alleluia, Alleluia.”* This is the Easter word and the ancient greeting of Christians. It is the great proclamation of the Church about the wonder and the mystery of God in the work of human redemption. Death is not everything; it is nothing. God makes something out of human sin and wickedness, even out of death. Such is new life, the radical new life of the Resurrection.

The tomb has become the womb of new life. We are provided with an entirely new way to think about human life; it is life with God, now and evermore. The word of Resurrection resounds in the liturgy of Easter beginning with the Easter Anthems. And resurrection and rebirth, new life and new beginnings are seen visually and actually in the baptism of Jen and David Appleby on this day. They are the visible reminders to us of our life in Christ. Their baptisms immediately recall us to our own.

Word and Sacrament. Easter is a word derived from *Eastra*, an ancient pagan Germanic Goddess of Spring. Other cultures speak of the *Pascha*, referring to the Passover and, indeed, the new Passover of Christ. The Easter Day anthems help us to understand something of the radical meaning of the Resurrection. *“Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him. For in that he died, he died unto sin once: but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God.”* The consequence of that for us is made clear in the Epistle, itself a proclamation. *“If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth at the right hand of God.”* That means we have to die to ourselves and our old ways, *“cast[ing] off the old self with its evil deeds, and put on the new.”* There is, in short, an new orientation and direction for our lives, a new birth for all, a new way of looking at things.

The challenge of Easter Day is quite simple. We are dead in ourselves. We live only in Christ. It is all about getting out of the tombs of our minds and our lives to be alive in Christ. How? Through the Gospel encounter with a new and transforming reality. It begins with the empty tomb with the puzzlement and perplexity of expectations shattered. It begins with confusion and uncertainty out of which will come a new understanding. Mary Magdalene comes early to the tomb, alone, only to find the first wonder, *“the stone taken away from the sepulchre.”* This sets her motion to tell the other disciples, Simon Peter and *“the other disciple whom Jesus loved,”* John. *“So they ran both together.”* John outruns Peter but only stoops down and looks in; he does not enter. Peter enters first and then John follows. Then suddenly, beyond the moving of the stone, they find that there is no body but only the linen clothes lying. It is for them and for us a complete mystery.

What sense can we make of it? And will that then be a human construction, the fabrication of a story by us? No. The accounts of the Resurrection have a compelling character to them. They show us the coming to birth of an idea and an understanding of the Resurrection, the dawning of an awareness that goes beyond what we ourselves could imagine. What drives that discovery is the Risen Christ himself. He will be the main witness to the Resurrection. In other words, we are opened out to an idea which cannot come from us but is worked out through our thinking upon the words and

deeds of Christ. It is a kind of divine intellection at work in and through us. New birth and new life precisely because we look at death and life in a new way.

The Resurrection counters many of the dogmatisms of our world and day. It proclaims the idea that you are more than some sort of organic algorithm, that you are more though not less than your bodies, that you are more though not less than dead and dying. Death is not longer the final word. Indeed death is transformed from being simply an end to becoming a way, a means to an end. How? By Christ's Resurrection.

The Resurrection does not ignore any of the harsh realities of human life. It confronts them head on. Sin and death, suffering and sorrow are not ignored nor denied; they are however profoundly transformed. Such is the nature of grace. It does not destroy nature, but perfects it. We are recalled to our life in God in Christ, *"for as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive."*

The Resurrection speaks to our modern anxieties about the self as well. We don't have to be defined by the pathologies and patterns, addictions and syndromes that so often come to define us. The Resurrection proclaims something new and different that has entirely to do with the redemption of our lives, by our lives in transformation. Not always suddenly and immediately but constantly and always by way of letting the grace of Christ move in us. That is what our life in faith is all about. It is the constant struggle to be defined not by our words and emotions but by Christ's Word proclaimed and celebrated, by our constant remembering of Christ in his sacrifice for us. This is our good and our joy, the great joy of resurrection. It changes everything if we will let it into our hearts and souls and so be, well, born again.

An important phrase, it does not have to do simply with our personal assertions and certainties. It has everything to do with a new way of life and a new way of looking at things. To be born again to be born upward into the things of God in Jesus Christ. It means dying to ourselves in order to live to God and for one another. Such is the radical new life of the Resurrection. We are only alive in Christ. He is our life and our life with one another in his body.

Jen and David have been made *"the children of God, members of the body of Christ, and inheritors of the kingdom of heaven"* by virtue of what Christ has commanded and provided. The things of the world, like water, are by virtue of a new sign made the instruments of eternal life. Only so can we be in God and with God in Christ. Bread and wine by virtue of a new signification are the body and blood of Christ that he may be truly in us and we in him. Such are all the things that belong to the Resurrection; it is the marvellous new fruit of the Passion. Out of the wounded side of the dead Christ, flow water and blood, the signs of the sacraments of the Church in Baptism and Holy Communion. Our joy, the joy of Easter, is simply to live in this wonder and mystery.

"Be it unto me according to thy word"

Easter 2018