

Holy Week and Easter at Christ Church, 2019
Fr. David Curry

Palm Sunday 2019

What mean ye by this service?

Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week, the week of the intensity of Christ's Passion. In it we confront all of the contradictions in our souls and in our lives. We confront our betrayals of the good, our betrayals of God. This awakens us to the radical nature of that goodness. We are given to see ourselves and to find ourselves in the events that belong to this holy week. It is the week of the Passion of Christ, the week of the Passover which undergoes a radical change of meaning through the sacrifice of Christ. In the Christian understanding, *"Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us"*.

The connection to the Passover story is undeniable. The question that belongs to the Jewish celebration of the Passover becomes our question. *"What mean ye by this service?"* (Ex. 12.26). The question reverberates throughout the whole of Holy Week.

Holy Week is one continuous liturgy, one continuous service. It is marked by different degrees of intensity and expression but in essence we enter into the Passion of Christ as modelled upon the ancient Passover celebration that defines Israel. It is about God's deliverance and thus signals the redemption of our humanity. It is about the liberation of the Hebrews from the yoke and tyranny of Pharaoh. How? By God's passing over the houses of the Hebrews, their lintels daubed with the blood of a lamb, the passover lamb, and thus sparing them the plague of the first-born. A sign that signifies and effects what it signifies, we might say. The rituals are the sacramental ways in which God's defining acts of deliverance are recalled and re-lived, re-presented for the Jewish people. They, in turn, shape the central act of Christian worship in recollecting the words and actions of Christ in the week of his Passion and the way in which those words and deeds are remembered and reenacted by us. We enter into the Passion of Christ sacramentally. Only so can we feel the thought, feel the Passion which we are required to contemplate and think always but throughout Holy Week especially.

The Passover recalls the exodus from Egypt under God's guiding hand. The Passover signals the central Jewish insight that becomes basic for Christians and Muslims. God acts and his act is sovereign and free and in him we are free and made whole. How that plays out in Judaism and Christianity and Islam is, of course, different, but such is the fundamental insight.

"What mean ye by this service?" The very question that belongs to the establishment of the Passover ritual carries over into Christianity and to Islam. It is about the active remembering of God's will to save and deliver and as such requires something of us. It means our participation in the ritual. The rituals are not empty signs. The question invites us to participate in the rituals of remembrance. Only so is the question a real question for us and in us.

We are in every scene of the Passion. We are in the crowd that belongs to these events. We are at once actors and spectators; either way we are totally implicated in the extraordinary meaning of this extraordinary week, the week that shapes all our weeks and days, all our months and years, and all our lives. Only so can we be gathered into the love of God for us. Only so can that love live in us. We are in the pageant of Holy Week.

Palm Sunday marks the beginning of a liturgy which will end at Easter and with a wondrous reversal of the heart-breaking cries of this day. The reading of the Palm Gospel entry of Christ into Jerusalem and then the reading of the Passion according to St. Matthew place us intentionally in these events. We are those who cry out "*Hosanna to God in the Highest*" only to turn about and then cry, "*Let him be Crucified, Let him be Crucified*". And with equal intensity of expression, if we have hearts and minds that can feel. We are caught up in the contradictions of our own souls. We confront the very ugliness of our being in order to be awakened to the beauty and grace of Christ's Passion and love for us. We cannot sing the Alleluias of Easter without the pageant of the Passion with these contradictory cries.

The two moments are inseparable; we separate them at our peril and miss the whole point of their conjunction. Holy Week reveals one of the great wonders of religion. God and God alone can make something good out of human evil. To contemplate our evil is to discover our good. Yet it all turns upon our desire for the goodness of God, our desire for his goodness to live and move in us. "*O taste and see how gracious the Lord is.*" Such is the liturgy by which we are immersed in the mortifying and yet redeeming and sanctifying grace of the God who seeks our salvation, our joy and our blessedness.

John Donne, in one of his holy sonnets, bids us look within and contemplate "*the picture of Christ crucified.*" The poem asks us to consider what we see there as recalled in our memories and to ask ourselves "*can that countenance thee affright?*" Can that face frighten you? What does the picture of Christ crucified awaken in us? Is it fear or loathing, revulsion or disgust?

There are no end of disturbing images of the crucified Christ. Donne has in mind, I think, the depictions of Christ crucified painted in Europe after the black plague of the 14th century (1347-1351) that decimated almost half the population of Europe, images which show the sufferings of Christ in particularly gruesome ways. They suggest that the hideous pains of the plague are known in the sufferings of Christ. This serves to emphasize the great spiritual insight that "*nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ*" (Romans 8.39). Donne bids us not only recall the *image* of Christ crucified as seen in Church windows and carvings but also to remember the *words* of the Crucified "*who prayed forgiveness for his foes' fierce spite.*" The first word from the Cross is the word of forgiveness, "*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do*" (Lk. 23.34), a word which makes no sense without our awareness of our need for forgiveness. "*Can that tongue adjudge thee unto hell which prayed forgiveness for his foes' fierce spite?*" the poem asks.

The two questions about what we recall as having seen and having heard, the spectacle and the words of the crucified, are answered with an emphatic “no, no”. To enter into Holy Week is to enter into the spectacle of things seen and heard, especially the things seen and heard of Christ. If we seek his grace and goodness, then the hideous events of this hideous week of our humanity’s inhumanity will turn into something beautiful and transforming. Such will be our salvation, our liberation, our joy, and our blessedness. But only through the Passion and all that it teaches us about sin and evil in order to teach us about grace and love. *“This beautiful form,”* Donne concludes *“assures a piteous mind.”* What seems hideous and evil in the picture of Christ crucified with his tears and his blood flowing down becomes something of surpassing beauty and truth to minds in need of pity and mercy. Our minds, our souls, our hearts, if we can think and feel. The question of our age is whether we can feel anything, whether we can feel what we are given to think and to contemplate.

Holy Week seeks the breaking of our hearts so that our hearts can be made new again. But only through the Passion of Christ and our participation in that Passion, letting our hearts feel all that belongs to our brokenness and all that belongs to the mercy of Christ. We, too, are on parade in the Passion of Christ. His passion reveals all of the disorders and disarray of our hearts in order to set love in order in us. Nowhere is that more concentrated than in the liturgies of Holy Week. The constant question is *“what mean ye by this service?”* As Exodus puts it, *“it shall come to pass, when your children shall say unto you, What mean ye by this service? That ye shall say, It is the sacrifice of the Lord’s passover, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt,”* (Ex. 12. 26,27). We enter into Holy Week to learn the meaning of Christ’s service which is sacrifice. *“Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us.”* The challenge is to let that sacrifice live in us.

“What mean ye by this service?”

Fr. David Curry
Palm Sunday, 2019

Palm Sunday, Evening Prayer 2019

What mean ye by this service?

The lessons at Morning Prayer for Palm Sunday provide the larger context for the readings at the Holy Communion. The first lesson is Exodus 11 which is the story of the event of the Passover itself after which we have in the next chapter the institution of that remembrance which is our Holy Week text or mantra, "*What mean ye by this service?*" The second lesson is the chapter which immediately precedes the Passion account of St. Matthew, the first of the four accounts of the Passion read in their entirety in Holy Week. We immerse ourselves in the Passion in all of its intensity.

What about this evening's readings? The lesson from Isaiah is the last of the four so-called servant songs and is the most intense in its expression about the idea of substitutionary suffering. The suffering of Israel for the sake of others is further intensified in the Christian understanding by the sufferings of Christ. Christ is "*despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted by grief.*" "*He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows ... he was wounded for our transgressions ... and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*" "*Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter*" (Is. 53. 3-7), ... "*he makes himself an offering for sin*" (Is. 53.10). The imagery concentrates the theme of the Passion as being the sufferings of Christ for us and in the face of our wickedness and indifference.

This evening's second lesson provides St. Luke's account of Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem, complementing the Palm Gospel at Mass from Matthew. He adds as a kind of postscript to the cleansing of the temple the theme of animosity towards Christ by "*the chief priests and scribes and the prominent men of the people*" who "*sought to destroy him.*" Yet, as Luke marvellously puts it, "*they did not find anything they could do, for all the people hung upon his words.*"

Holy Week is about our hanging upon the words of Christ, learning a great good even in and through the spectacles of sin and violence, in and through the miscarriages of justice and the betrayals of trust and goodness. We are in these events at one with "*the chief priests and scribes and prominent men of the people*" whose self-interest and pride and presumption are indeed challenged and threatened by the words and presence of Christ and at one, too, with "*all the people*" that "*hung upon his words.*" The latter suggests a spirit of longing and learning that is the counter to all our illusions of power and control. In hanging upon his words in the pageant of Holy Week, we journey with Christ in his passover for us. The meaning of the services of Holy Week is our participation in the sacrifice of Christ. Such is our freedom and our good.

What mean ye by this service?

Fr. David Curry
Palm Sunday, EP, 2019

Monday in Holy Week 2019

What mean ye by this Service?

"An alabaster box of ointment of spikenard, very precious" broken opened and the tears of Peter flowing forth frame *The Beginning of the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ According to St. Mark*: the one an anointing signifying Christ's burial in an act of love-in-forgiveness by the unnamed woman; the other, tears of sorrow and contrition after having recalled the words of Christ and his betrayal of himself and Christ. Powerful moments that illumine the intensity of the Passion and our part in it.

The Passion is further illumined by the readings from Hosea and John at Mattins and Vespers, lessons which are all about the love of God at work in human hearts and minds. Hosea is the great love-prophet of the Old Testament while John's Gospel underlies the whole of Holy Week in the Offices. It complements and informs and the other accounts of the Passion.

Hosea's powerful words are about the possibilities of a return to the God from whom we have turned away. *"Take with you words and return to the Lord your God."* Return how? By heartfelt repentance in the acknowledgement of our follies and sins. This morning's lesson describes well the problem of worshipping the works of our hands rather than God, the author of our very being and of the whole of creation. The people of Israel keep on sinning by making images before which they sacrifice and worship. *"Men kiss calves,"* is Hosea derisive and dismissive comment. He is harkening back to the Exodus when the people of Israel made molten calves, imagining that the creatures who pulled their wagons were their deliverers rather than the God who revealed himself to Moses and gave the Law. We are so easily drawn to what is immediate and present. A molten calf is just a dead cow, not even good for the barbecue.

Hosea reminds us that God is God and that Israel has known no other God. *"It was I who fed you in the wilderness,"* God says, before observing in a very telling phrase that *"when I fed them, they were satisfied; they were satisfied, and their heart was proud; therefore they forgot me."* How then will we remember? How will we return to God? God says that he will become like a lion, like a leopard, like a mother bear, not to defend Israel, but to destroy Israel! We have to be unmade in order to be made anew. Such strong language awakens us to the wonder and truth that there can be no help for us except from God. It is from Hosea that Paul gets the wonderful phrase *"O death, where is thy sting? O grace, where is thy victory?"* seeing in the phrase a rhetorical question that points to God as the one and only source of healing and grace, to the God who heals and loves. *"I will heal their disloyalty; I will love them freely."* The idols are the follies of our own making. *"O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols? It is I who answer and look after you."* As Hosea remarks, *"those who are wise understand these things."*

That is the challenge of Holy Week. It is to enter into the meaning of the events of the Passion. It is to discern the meaning of this service. It will mean discovering the long

sad tale of our foolish ways and the destructive nature of all our betrayals but even more it means learning the love which is poured out like the ointment of spikenard from the broken box of alabaster. It happens, too, in the awareness of our betrayals which makes the tears to flow, the tears of repentance and contrition.

The tears that flow together with the precious oil of the anointing of Christ's body belong to our remembrance of the words of Christ. This is what it means to *"take with you words and return to the Lord your God"* as Hosea bids us. *"They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me,"* Jesus says in John's Gospel, *"and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."*

Love and word are intimately connected; heart and mind, intellect and sensibility belong together in harmony. *"Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them."* We abide in the love of God by his word alive in us, visibly and audibly. Such is the meaning of this service. It is about Word and Sacrament intimately and inescapably united.

Oil poured out upon the head of Christ and tears falling down our faces redeem our broken hearts; only so can we be made whole.

What mean ye by this Service?

Fr. David Curry
Monday in Holy Week, 2019

Tuesday in Holy Week 2019

What mean ye by this service?

Holy Week is about our participation in the Passion of Christ. In the spectacles of human evil, particularly of envy and the betrayals of justice, we learn about the goodness of God and about redemptive suffering. That counters our easy default to a kind of gnosticism, to acquiescing in a dualist view of reality. The deeper lesson of the Passion has to do with God making something good out of our evil, an evil which is always predicated upon the assumption of the goodness of existence and of human will and reason.

The problem lies with the way in which our will and our reason, our knowing, are compromised, twisted, and perverted. We think we see clearly when we don't see at all. We think we know what it is that is right to do without a glimmer of an awareness of the limits of our knowing and without any sense of the destructive power of our will. In a way, the Passion of Christ intends to confront us with these realities that belong to the human condition in its fallenness. Our loves are in disarray. To learn this is our good.

Thus we need to learn about the true vocation of our humanity wonderfully signaled in the Morning Prayer lesson from Isaiah, the first of the so-called suffering servant songs and one in which the vocation of Israel and thus our human vocation is concentrated in a single figure. For Christians, this is Christ, the one in whom and whom alone that vocation can be realised. The corollary of that claim is that only in Christ can we embrace the vocation to be "*a covenant to the peoples,*" "*a light to lighten the nations,*" "*to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon*" and "*the darkness*" of ignorance and folly; in short, "*to establish justice.*" As the second lesson from the 15th chapter of John shows us that is only possible through our incorporation into the life of Christ. "*I am the vine; ye are the branches*" ... "*abide in me*" ... "*abide in my love,*" Jesus tells us. Powerful words which signal something positive.

And yet at the same time, as this evening's first lesson from Wisdom reminds us, human evil arising as it often does out of envy against the good of another, leads to violence and conspiracy against the righteous man. "*They hated me without a cause,*" as Jesus says in tonight's second lesson. Why? Because the good convicts us of our evil. It is a kind of folly on our part because what we are really saying is that our good is found in denying the good of another and in reality denying our own good. We are in contradiction with ourselves and a danger to others. Yet as Wisdom reminds us in our reasoning we are often led astray "*because [we] did not know the secret purposes of God.*" We forget that "*God created man for incorruption, and made him in the image of his own eternity,*" an echo from Genesis of our being made in the image of God. This is the profound teaching and insight of the Wisdom literature in its grasp of the true dignity of our humanity. It is the counter to all that we see in the Passion of Holy Week.

"*Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends,*" Jesus says in the 15th chapter of John's Gospel. Somehow the vocation of our humanity now deepens into the possibilities of friendship with God, friendship with the good, with wisdom and truth. And yet what the Continuation of the Passion According to St. Mark shows

us is precisely our evil and, indeed, the evil of envy, that most destructive and violent of the seven deadly sins. That is what we are given to see along with the betrayals of justice through callous expediency and indifference to what Pilate himself knows as false in the claims against Jesus. Why? So that through the spectacle of human evil we might see what the Centurion looking on the crucified sees and say with him, that *"truly this man was the Son of God."* That is to look at the Cross which though veiled is knowingly present before us and which convicts us of our faults and failings.

That is the break-through moment that reveals the meaning of this service, the meaning of Holy Week. The spectacles of human evil can only reveal the goodness of God and how that goodness for our humanity can be brought out of the horrors of suffering and sin and evil.

In this week of broken hearts, the spectacle of the burning of the iconic cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris is utterly heartbreaking. For me the most moving image is the picture of the Cross shining above the smoke and overlooking the devastation and wreck of burnt timbers in the nave. There is more than just the devastation. The cross shines forth in mystic glow, as the Passiontide hymn puts it, and illumines us even in the midst of sin and sorrow, of loss and devastation. Such, after all, is the meaning of Holy Week.

What mean ye by this service?

Fr. David Curry
Tuesday in Holy Week, 2019

Wednesday in Holy Week, Tenebrae 2019

What mean ye by this service?

Tenebrae means darkness or shadows. It underscores an important feature of our Holy Week observances. They are not about a linear sequence of events. We immerse ourselves in the Passion of Christ in all four accounts of the Passion along with the kinds of scriptural commentary that passages from the Old Testament and the New Testament provide. It is really all a kind of circling around the meaning of the Passion in and through the complex of perspectives that are part of its fundamental and doctrinal unity. Thus the ancient Medieval services of Tenebrae are anticipatory of the events of the *Triduum Sacrum*. The services of Tenebrae anticipate the Mattin services of each following day: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday.

Tenebrae, then, is a kind of shadowing forth of what we already know but know only in the shadows and the darkness of our minds. We know the story of Christ's Passion and Resurrection but only partially, only "*in a glass darkly*" (1 Cor. 13..13), as it were. Thus Tenebrae reminds us of what the veiled cross signifies, namely, the limitations and incompleteness of our understanding. And yet, Tenebrae is about the passion of our quest to know and to understand more fully the radical meaning of Christ's passion as the pageant of divine love.

Tenebrae anticipates. We participate in the intensity of the Passion by anticipation. Tonight we read the Matins and Lauds of Maundy Thursday. Our modern Tenebrae services are usually restricted to the Wednesday of Holy Week. But it all belongs to the meaning of the services of this week. We anticipate the *Triduum Sacrum*, the three Holy Days of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday. We do so by our attention to the psalm offices of Matins and Lauds and to the readings which illumine and belong to the deepening of our understanding about Christ's Passion.

We can only do this in the light of the Resurrection. That is, after all, how all of the accounts of the Passion and by extension the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament have come down to us along with the Creeds that encapsulate the essentials of the Christian faith. We immerse ourselves in the challenge of trying to understand the radical nature of God's love for us revealed in Christ's sacrifice.

We do so in the attempt to feel the thinking, to experience the meaning, if you will. The Office lessons of Morning and Evening Prayer aid us in that endeavour. At issue is whether we have the hearts and minds to think and feel the redemption of our humanity being restored to its truth and dignity through the Passion of Christ for us and in us.

There is a great richness to the scriptural images that Holy Week sets before us. So many different ways to enter into the meaning of the Passion. That is why the most important feature of Holy Week is the reading of the Passion along with the other

Scriptures which help us in our understanding. The real preaching is not my poor efforts. The real preaching is the proclamation of the Passion itself.

Among the images in the accounts of the Passion, there is one in particular that stands out for me as pointing so beautifully and profoundly to the underlying spirit of Holy Week in all of its intensity. It is found in the beginning of Luke's account of the Passion read today. It is Luke's telling of Peter's betrayal and the form of his confronting himself in his betrayal of Christ. A most powerful scene, it shows Peter in the shadows of the high priest's house where he denies that he even knows Christ. As Luke puts it, *"and immediately, while he yet spake, the cock crew."* For Matthew and Mark, that is enough to make Peter remember and to call to mind the word and the saying of Jesus, enough to occasion his tears of contrition. But Luke adds a masterly touch, I think, and one which goes to the heart of the whole project of Holy Week. On the one hand, it is very much about our attention to Christ in his passion such that in looking upon the crucified we might cry out with the Centurion *"Truly this man was the Son of God,"* but on the other hand, it is very much more about Christ looking upon us; in other words, how we are known by God.

Luke gets that point poignantly and most movingly. *"The cock crew"* and Luke simply adds *"and the Lord turned and looked upon Peter."* Everything is in that look. That look occasions Peter's remembrance of the word of the Lord. What is that look? It complements, I suggest, certain moments of Christ on the cross when he looks down upon Mary and John and bids them behold him and one another, when he looks across to the penitent thief crucified with him who asks Jesus to remember him, when he looks up to the Father and places himself in his Father's hands. The look is the Christ's gaze of compassion, his look of love.

Nothing can move us more perhaps than such a look of loving compassion. It moves the heart of Peter to repentance and contrition. Will it move us? The meaning of this service, the meaning of Holy Week, is that we be moved by the love of Christ for us. Sometimes it is a word, like the lamentations of Christ speaking to us out of the intensity of the Passion, as it were. But sometimes it is just a look..

What mean ye by this service?

Fr. David Curry
Tenebrae, Wednesday in Holy Week 2019

Maundy Thursday 2019

What mean ye by this service?

You may be forgiven for wondering, 'which service?' For Maundy Thursday is really a great jumble of services, a collection of rituals. There is the rite of the washing of the feet; there is the rite of the royal mandatum, a gift of money to the poor; there is the Judas Cup ceremony at Durham Cathedral; there is the institution of the Holy Eucharist in the Upper Room with his disciples "*on the night,*" this very night, "*in which he was betrayed*"; there is the stripping of the altar; there is the watch in remembrance of Christ's agony in the garden of Gethsemane. "*Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done.*" "*What mean ye by these services?*" we have to ask.

And yet the connecting thread of meaning is clear. It has altogether to do with the power of the concept of sacrifice, a concept so much misunderstood that it now belongs less to its profound religious and spiritual sensibilities and more to the pathologies of the therapeutic culture. Sacrifice here is not about calling attention to oneself, about victimhood; it is entirely about the giving of oneself for the sake of others. Such is love. Such is true agency. Such is true love. Love is not love if it is not sacrificial love. It is entirely about putting oneself freely and utterly on the line, not counting the cost. It is love without calculation. It is simply love.

"*What mean ye by this service?*" This is our text throughout Holy Week. It concentrates for us the purpose of our rather intense and demanding Holy Week observances. Nothing could be more counter-culture. The places are few and far between that undertake such a demanding regime. And yet, it really all begins with Maundy Thursday, the day of the new commandment, *novum mandatum*. Maundy is simply the englishing of the Latin word, *mandatum*, which means commandment. A new commandment. That is the unifying theme. The new commandment is "*that you love one another as I have loved you.*" That is our vocation and challenge: that our loves should be nothing less and nothing more than God's love moving in us. That new commandment is simply service as sacrifice. And that is what unites the diverse services of this holy day.

All of the services have a sacramental aspect to them. They are all about making visible what is invisible, about Word and Sacrament, if you will, about the harmony of intellect and sense. Sacrifice is not a negative. The radical transformation of thought, to which the New Testament, especially in the Holy Week readings, makes clear, is about the ways in which we are drawn into the divine life. The services of this day are all about the forms of sacrifice.

And nowhere more so than in the gathering in the Upper Room. There Christ takes bread and identifies it with his body; there he takes wine and identifies it with his

blood. He does so in anticipation of his Passion and in provision for our constant living from him in his death and resurrection for us as sacramentally remembered by us. The intensity of the Passion is the meaning of Holy Week. Here that intensity has an undeniable sacramental emphasis. Here, as Augustine wonderfully puts it, "*Christ carries himself in his own hands.*" He does so to provide us with the means of our constant participation in his redemptive work. He does so to put himself into our hands. The key word is sacrifice. Service is sacrifice in Christ and Christ's sacrifice in us, "our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving," as our liturgy so beautifully and powerfully puts it.

With Maundy Thursday, the events of Holy Week mount up to a crescendo of intensity. We are drawn more and more fully into the details of the Passion and more and more into the idea of service and sacrifice. "*Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us.*" This is our prayer and our cry. We are to find ourselves completely in the drama of the dogma of salvation.

The Judas Cup ceremony of the medieval monks of Durham cathedral illumines something of the radical nature of service and sacrifice. It has entirely with how we see ourselves, on the one hand, and what we see in ourselves, on the other hand, and all through how Christ sees us revealed in the accounts of the Passion. In the Judas Cup ceremony the monks of the cathedral drink from a mazer - a kind of bowl - only to see themselves in the face of Judas engraven in the bottom of the mazer. Holy Week is not about facing the sins of others; it is about facing our own sins and our own betrayals of the divine love. It is that kind of looking that convicts us and convinces us about service and sacrifice. Such is our life in the meaning of Holy Week.

"What mean ye by this service?"

Fr. David Curry,
Maundy Thursday, 2019

Good Friday Ecumenical Service 2019

Fr. Curry's introductory remarks to the reading of "In the Courtyard" by Beth Donaldson at the Good Friday Ecumenical Service at Windsor United Church, April 19th, 2019.

We gather under the shadows of the Cross. Perhaps, just perhaps, we may be enlightened by its shadows, even if only to be made aware of our fallenness and our brokenness, of our sin and folly. "Assured of certain certainties" (Eliot, Preludes IV), like Peter, we shall discover our betrayals and yet that can only mean the discovery of something more, something greater, even a great good.

"Come in under the shadow of this red rock ...," the poet T.S. Eliot writes in *The Waste Land*, "and I will show you fear in a handful of dust."

Perhaps, just perhaps, something of that wisdom might be found for us in the poem "In the Courtyard."

The whispers around the edges
Haunt as we remember his words;
"Very truly, I tell you ...
Before the cock crows ..."

The accusing curiosities mount;
"Isn't he one of them?"
Hushed and condemning;
"Wasn't he among those who followed?"

But he had said, too:
"Where I am going, you cannot follow me now."

All these years and months of following;
Now, to deny
Now, to abandon
Now, to allow betrayal?

"Why can I not follow you now?"
Why does our courage leave us when
All we desire
Is to rise
To your vision
Soar to your affection
And stand tall in your truth and trust?

Instead
We find ourselves

Frozen by our frail and lonely
Humanity.

Good Friday 2019

“What mean ye by this service?”

It is called Good Friday? Why, we might ask? In so doing, we are really asking, “*what mean ye by this service?*” How is this good? The Passion of Christ reaches its fullest and inexhaustible intensity in the Crucifixion of Christ. And while we can only contemplate Christ’s Crucifixion because of the Resurrection, itself the fruit of the Passion, it is equally the case that without Good Friday, Easter has no meaning. There is a profound good that belongs to what we contemplate on this day.

We contemplate the real horror and meaning of human sin. There is lots of violence and nastiness, selfishness and self-regard, narcissism and nihilism, not to mention sheer stupidity and stubbornness, to go around in our world and day, more than we can take in and deal with, and yet this day shows us the greater evil which moves in all of the disorders of human hearts and minds since the beginning of time and even to the end of time. What is that? Simply our attempt to kill God.

That is the radical meaning of Christ’s Crucifixion. God in Christ gives himself into our hands so that we can do with him what we will. We have our way. It is not a pretty picture. Yet this is the real meaning of having our way, the real meaning of our vaunted claims to autonomy, the real meaning of all our assertions of control. It is not only destructive of one another through our domination and control of one another whether in passive aggressive ways so finely tuned or in the more brutal forms of active aggression. No. Good Friday bids us plumb the depths of satanic evil that is potential and real in all our hearts. Christ crucified shows us exactly the deep and radical meaning of sin. It is the attempt to eradicate altogether the very principle of our being and knowing and loving, the very principle of the being and knowing of all things - God. We who depend upon God for our every breath and thought and word and deed deny him and seek to annihilate him from the horizons of our minds.

It is utter folly, a delusion, a contradiction. Yet to confront this and to see this made visible before us is the only way in which we might discover the real truth and dignity of our humanity. We “*look upon him whom [we] have pierced,*” as our liturgy reminds us, drawing upon the words of Zechariah recalled by John. The point, as Lancelot Andrewes teaches, is that we in turn should be pierced; in other words, convicted in our consciences about the radical meaning of all sin. We pierce God. We kill God. To say that seems quite astounding but it is the deep logic of the Christian faith without which we cannot understand the radical nature of the Resurrection. What is the good of this day? It is Christ’s death. His death for us is freely embraced and endured for the sake of our being made new. And so we are broken-hearted in order to be made new.

The world’s attention has been captivated by the devastating fire at the Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris. The response to that event has been remarkable. Much attention has been called to the significance of the building, to its role and place in the history not only of France but of Europe and beyond. And yet so much of the commentary dances around the obvious, afraid to name the real meaning and significance of the Cathedral.

The real significance of Notre-Dame de Paris, as a Canadian commentator, John Robson, notes, is that it is a church! More than an icon of culture, more than a tourist attraction, it "*speaks to our aspirations to be better than we are,*" to a kind of universal hope in us that we can be better (National Post, April 16th, 2019). Exactly.

It reminds us of an age defined by a vibrant and an intellectual faith which we have largely lost and yet is always there to be recovered just like Notre-Dame can be restored. The fire confronts us with other features of our disordered world. There are, it seems, no trees in France or in the whole of Europe large enough to replace the huge wooden beams that were part of the roof of the cathedral. We confront the sad and sorry consequence of our failure to be good stewards of our world. And so here too. Look up and behold the beams of this Church. They are at once functional - they hold up the roof - and symbolic. They are Alpha and Omega beams that signify Christ as our beginning and end. We are embraced in Christ, the alpha and omega of our lives. Those beams were all hewn from local trees of remarkable stature and size that once abounded in these regions but no more. It is a telling indictment about our careless use and abuse of the world in which we find ourselves. A cautionary tale perhaps but part of what belongs to the pageant of the Passion.

To face such things is to confront ourselves and at the same time to be reminded of our aspirations to be better than what we are. To contemplate the forms of our sinfulness is to awaken to the greater truth of God. Such is the good of Good Friday. It is not about ignoring sin. It is about facing sin in its truest form. Such is the Crucifixion of Christ which this day sets before us to break our hearts so that our hearts can be made new. It is a constant process, a constant work in progress.

The intensity of the Passion is about our capacity and willingness to enter into the Passion with heart and mind. T. S. Eliot observes about the Metaphysical poets of the early seventeenth century that they "*possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience,*" even more, he says, they had the special quality of "*feel[ing] their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose.*" To feel the thought.

John Donne's poem, A Hymn to God the Father, captures something of the deep meaning of this service and reminds us of the constant need to behold Christ crucified; in short, to feel what we behold.

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

- II. Wilt thou forgive that sin which I have won
 Others to sin? and, made my sin their door?
Wilt thou forgive that sin which I did shun
 A year, or two: but wallowed in, a score?

When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more.

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

Such is the good of Good Friday, if we can think and feel what we behold. Such is the real meaning of this service.

“What mean ye by this service?”

Fr. David Curry
Solemn Liturgy of Good Friday, 2019

Holy Saturday 2019

“What mean ye by this service?”

We gather at the grave of Christ in silence. It is the quietest of times, the most peaceful day of the year in a way. All is done. *“It is finished.”* To be sure. All that belongs to the reconciliation between God and man *is* accomplished on the Cross. Today marks the peace of Paradise, as it were.

And yet the readings for Holy Saturday suggest something more that belongs to the radical nature of Christ’s sacrifice, to the radical nature of God’s desire to be reconciled with our humanity and world. Holy Saturday marks the creedal mystery of the Descent into Hell. What does that mean? It means the fullest possible extent of God’s desire to be reconciled with the whole of our sinful humanity.

Drawing upon imagery from Zechariah, our readings from 1st Peter this morning point to the idea of Christ going and preaching to the spirits in prison, in the darkness of Sheol. The work of human redemption extends far beyond our assurances about ourselves, far beyond the narrow limits of our world-view. The great icons of the Resurrection in Eastern Orthodoxy envision for us something of the great mystery of this day. Christ is depicted as drawing Adam and Eve and a train of others out of the grave, out of the pit of darkness. Such is reconciliation writ large, we might say.

At the very least, our gathering at the grave of Christ allows for the possibilities of something more. Of hope. Ultimately the reconciling grace of Christ for the whole of the world, for the whole of our humanity - such after all is its universal scope without which it is nothing - moves us to watch and wait expectantly. It will lead us to the vigil of Easter and to the radical outcome of that reconciling love in the Resurrection. Already in John’s Gospel we are made aware of that idea and the plans taken by the Chief Priests and the Pharisees who petition Pilate for a watch and a stone. Such is the fearfulness of our humanity in the limitations of our imagination and our reason. Such too is our folly in thinking that we can ultimately contain and restrict the will and actions of God. Already in the quiet mystery of Holy Saturday, Christ, the Word and Son of the Father, shows us that his reconciling sacrifice on the Cross is always something active and alive, and something, too, which speaks to the whole of our humanity. There is, we might say, the constant doing of what is done.

We watch and wait at the borrowed tomb of Christ, the tomb borrowed from Joseph of Arimathea. We watch and wait upon the Christ who “borrowed a body that he might borrow a death” (Athanasius), our death. That changes everything.

“What mean ye by this service?”

Fr. David Curry
Holy Saturday 2019

Matins & Ante-Communion

Easter Vigil 2019

What mean ye by this service?

We can only know it retroactively, after the fact, as it were. The Resurrection is the great new creation, God's redemptive act that restores and renews our humanity and the world. The Passion and the Resurrection are cosmic events, we might say, arguing for a much more intimate and closer relationship between our humanity and the natural world than what we currently experience in our disordered world. Like creation, we can only know the Resurrection after the fact and yet that only leads to a whole new way of thinking that means seeing everything before it in a new light. In a way, the Easter Vigil is about that whole new way of thinking and seeing things. It is about a recapitulation of the past seen now in the light of the Resurrection.

The ceremonies of the Vigil are traditionally long (three hours or more!), intense, symbolic, and fully participatory. Our country vigil, as I like to call it, is a concentrated version of the Great Vigil of Easter but contains most of the same elements except for the blessing of the Font and the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. Like the traditional Vigils of Easter, there is the lighting of the new fire in the darkness; the blessing and lighting of the Paschal (Easter) Candle; the singing of the Exultet or Paschal Praeconium, the great proclamation of the Resurrection parts of which derive from Ambrose; the reading of some (though not all) of the 'prophecies' - there are up to twelve!; the renewal of our baptismal vows; and, finally, the lauds of Easter morn. All rather simple but profound.

What does it mean? It means our participation in the fruit of the Passion, the Resurrection. We re-enact sacramentally the meaning of the Resurrection as God's great re-creative and redemptive act. Life triumphs over death; light over darkness. It cannot be the extinguishing of the past but the past now as seen in a new light, in the light of the Resurrection. The Vigil imaginatively and scripturally celebrates the passover from death to life, from darkness to light, representing the whole history of salvation. The renewal of our baptismal vows - or in the case of Bronwyn, the rehearsal of the vows she will make tomorrow morning - reminds us that the great Vigil of Easter was precisely that time when converts to the Faith, young and old, individually and by family, were baptized and confirmed by the officiating bishop. In other words, we participate and recall our incorporation into the Body of Christ.

It is precisely in the wonder and joy of the Resurrection that we have journeyed with Christ in his Passion. The Resurrection shows us the underlying principle and power at work in the Passion of Christ; it is the compassion of God and the power of the divine life which recreates and renews even out of the nothingness of our sin and evil. Yet the Vigil, too, is about our joyous participation in that work of redemption at once sacramentally through the rituals of remembrance and by sacrificial service in our life

and ministry together as priest and people. The Easter Vigil is, as Augustine remarks, "the mother of all vigils" and in a double sense as being the greatest of all vigils and as bringing to birth like a mother our faith. New birth. New life. Such is the Resurrection. It is all joy. All alleluias! *"Rise heart! Thy Lord is risen. Sing his praise always."*

What mean ye by this service?

Fr. David Curry
Easter Vigil 2019

Easter 2019

“What mean ye by this service?”

This has been our text throughout the Passion of Christ and one which now carries us into this day and to the proclamation of this day: *Christ is risen, Alleluia! Alleluia! The Lord is risen, indeed, Alleluia! Alleluia!* Now that’s a greeting! And one to be shouted out. It says a bit more than “Happy Easter” which might just as well mean, “May the bunny be with you!” Maybe even a chocolate bunny. Just saying. The great and ancient Easter greeting on this day is the proclamation of the Resurrection. *Christ is risen. Alleluia! Alleluia!*

And yet, the real meaning of this day, paradoxically it might seem, is that we are dead! For if we are not dead, then we shall not be alive. “*You have died,*” Paul tells us, “*and your life is hid with Christ in God.*” What this means is sacrifice in its deepest and truest meaning. Holy Week is about the Passion of Christ in all of its intensity but only so as to bring us to this day, the day of Resurrection, itself the fruit of the Passion and thus utterly meaningless without the solemn events of Holy Week and especially Good Friday. There can be no Resurrection without the Passion.

Bronwyn’s baptism is our Easter joy. Her baptism is a reminder of our vocation and calling, a reminder of the realities of death and life, a reminder of the radical new life of the Resurrection precisely through our dying to ourselves in order to live for God and for one another. She died and now she lives. And all because of the Passion and Resurrection of Christ. That is the meaning of this service. We are dead so that we may live. Our life is not in ourselves. It is all Christ and all Christ in us. His sacrifice is love, a love made visible on the Cross and in his Resurrection.

The Resurrection is radical new life because it grounds us in the only life there is, the life of God in Christ. The Resurrection is the new and greater creation, the making of life and joy out of the nothingness of human sin and evil and of suffering and death. That is its radical meaning. God and God alone makes out of nothing both in creation and in redemption. The Resurrection is the greater *creatio ex nihilo*, the greater act of making new. The Crucifixion is not a gothic horror tale, a Stephen King shocker. It is graphic, to be sure, but it is the graphic portrayal of the nature of all sin and evil. We kill God. At least that is what all sin attempts, the attempt to deny the very principle of life upon which our being, our knowing and our loving completely and utterly depend. The Crucifixion makes that reality visible even as the Resurrection makes visible the overcoming of all sin. Both are the graphic lessons of love. Such is a new beginning just as Bronwyn’s baptism marks a new beginning, a new life, one made visible to us in the act of baptism.

But only in and through Christ’s Resurrection. It shows us compellingly and tellingly that our humanity is more though not less than our bodies, more though not less than our embodied experiences and lives, more though not less than our sufferings and deaths. It is about the radical redemption of our humanity to a life with Christ. We only live in him by his living in us.

Such are the sacramental realities of this day signalled in baptism and communion. Both are understood to flow out of the wounded and dead body of Christ hanging on the Cross. Christ on the Cross is pierced and out of his dead side flow blood and water. Those inclined to an empirical approach to all things might note that this suggests a broken heart. To be sure, it does. The heart of Christ is broken for us. His life is poured out for us so that his life can live in us. Such is the meaning of the sacraments.

God and God alone can conquer sin and death. Christ is God and Man and in that mystery lies the redemption of our humanity. We are restored to fellowship with God through the sacrifice of Christ. The deep meaning of that sacrifice is love. The love of God in himself as Trinity is poured out to become our life in God and with one another.

That we are embodied beings capable of grasping meaning and truth also means that we are capable of the betrayals of meaning and truth. Yet we cannot live a negative, a lie. Christ's death is the death of death; his Resurrection changes death utterly. Death is no longer "*mighty and dreadful*," as Donne puts it. It is no longer the end of the story, a *terminus*. It has become a *transitus*, a means to the true end of our lives with Christ and in Christ both now and hereafter. What we celebrate is this radical new life born out of the sacrifice of Christ, born out of the descent into Hell, born out of the deep love of God who in thinking and loving himself thinks and loves all things. Nowhere is that more dramatically shown than in the Resurrection.

It changes everything. The whole of Holy Week is only possible through the Resurrection. It belongs to our good to contemplate our unloveliness but only so as to make us new and lovely. For so we are in Christ.

There is a deep honesty to the accounts of the Resurrection that complements the accounts of the Passion. We are shown the dawning awareness on the part of the disciples about the radical meaning of who Christ is and what that means for us. Like Mary Magdalene, we come to the tomb seeking Christ's body only to find he is not there. In running and telling Simon Peter and "*the other disciple whom Jesus loved*," she is the first witness to the beginning of our learning about the Resurrection. The first clue is the empty tomb with the stone rolled away. Simon Peter and John confirm what she is said. It is a wonderful moment. Both run together. John, here described as the other disciple, "*did outrun Peter*" and gets to the sepulchre first but does not enter. Peter following him gets there and immediately enters. What does this mean? Simply mere description? Or does it suggest something about the differences of character and different ways of knowing that belong to each?

John Scotus Eriugena, John the Scot from Ireland, an outstanding ninth century theologian, saw in this story the relationship between faith and reason. Faith enters first and then reason. Anselm built on this with the famous phrase: *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding. In a way, the whole of Easter and Eastertide is about how we come to learn and know the Resurrection and in ways that complement each of our individual ways of knowing. We grasp it each according to the capacity of the beholder to behold. No one shows that better than John in his accounts of the Resurrection.

The point is that there a sequence, a process of learning, of coming to know what is actually a whole new way of thinking about life and about ourselves. It means seeing things in a whole new light, what Paul talks about in terms of *"seek[ing] those things that are above,"* the things which Christ in his Passion and Resurrection has *"made manifest."* We are more than death and sorrow, more than suffering and sin. Yet through those realities we are made new. Not through the ignoring of the things of the past but through the redemption of Christ.

Sacrifice means more though not necessarily less than death. It means above all else living for God and for one another. Our bodies are not everything but neither are they nothing. In Christ they become the vessels of a new way of being, a way of living for God and with God in Christ.

We live in Christ but only if we are dead to ourselves. This is our joy in the transition from the *"Hosannas"* of Palm Sunday to the heart-rending cries of *"Crucify"* and now to the joyous *"Alleluias"* of the Resurrection. *Christ is risen, Alleluia! Alleluia! The Lord is risen, indeed, Alleluia! Alleluia!* It is what we mean by this service.

"What mean ye by this service?"

Fr. David Curry,
Easter 2019
(Baptism of Bronwyn Emma Kate Appleby)