

“Be it unto me according to thy word”

Homilies for Passiontide and Easter



Rogier Van der Weyden (1399/1400-1464), Louvre, Paris

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“Be it unto me according to thy word”

The cross is veiled. It is there but it cannot be clearly seen. We see but *“through a glass darkly,”* as Paul expresses it in the Epistle read on *Quinquagesima Sunday*. We know and we do not know, Jesus suggests on this day. Such are the greater paradoxes of *Passion Sunday*. Do we simply rest in these ambiguities, preferring the forms of indeterminacy and indefiniteness that belong to contemporary culture? Or do we really seek to see and know and to be seen and known by God? To love and be loved, too, we might ask?

Passion Sunday confronts all our ambiguities and names our uncertainties. Jesus so gently, it seems to me, says to the mother of Zebedee’s children who *“desir[ed] a certain thing of him”* that *“ye know not what ye ask.”* How does one respond to that? Yet it signals the profoundest truth about our wounded and broken humanity. It will be signaled even more eloquently and more poignantly in the first word from the Cross. *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”* We don’t know what we want and we don’t know what we are doing. And yet we ask and yet we act as if we do.

What is needed then? Simply a change, a *metanoia* of the mind; in short, repentance. We are apt to think of that in terms which are far too limited, as if repentance was merely our saying sorry. This day opens us out to a deeper understanding of repentance. And it is signaled for us in an even greater paradox that belongs to this day this year.

Today is also *Lady Day*, the commemoration of *the Annunciation of Mary*. Christ’s Passion has central place

however and so the celebration of the Annunciation is transferred to Tuesday. Yet, the conjunction of the *Annunciation* with the *Passion* arrests the mind, as it did the mind of the poet John Donne, contemplating in 1608 the even greater conjunction of the *Annunciation* and *Good Friday* on the same day. Somehow the themes of the Birth and Life are inseparable from the themes of Death and Resurrection, Christmas and Easter. It concentrates the mind upon what he called the "*abridgment of Christ's story,*" his coming to us and going from us into death, the Angel's *Ave* and Christ's *Consummatum est*, the one heralding the beginning, *Hail Mary*, and the other the sense of ending, "*it is finished.*" Such rich paradoxes illumine the glory.

"Immensity cloister'd in thy dear womb," as Donne puts it in another poem. *Passion Sunday* signals the rich *immensity* of Christ who begins his earthly life in Mary's womb. He then breaks forth into the world as the incarnate son at Christmas only to go to the tomb of Good Friday from which he breaks forth again into resurrection glory at Easter. The tomb becomes the womb of new life, the new life of the Resurrection. We know this, don't we? We know the story. Indeed. We do know and yet we don't. We don't fully grasp the "*immensity*" of the mystery "*cloister'd* [hidden or contained] *in thy dear womb*" and which now goes the way of the Cross.

The cross is veiled from our eyes. How will we come to see more clearly? That is the further significance, it seems to me, of *Passiontide* which ushers in deep Lent, the profounder contemplation of all the forms of our unknowing. The answer to today's Gospel question, "*what do you want?*" is given by Mary's response to the mystery

of the Angelic salutation. She heard the *Ave* of the Angel; she asked what it meant, "*how can this be?*" She responds to the explanation with the words, "*be it unto me according to thy word.*"

What this means for us, I think, is our attentiveness to the things of Christ's passion, the things that, of course, are opened out to us through the Scriptures read in this holy season. It may be that, like Mary, "*a sword shall pierce through [our] own souls also*" at what we hear and see, for what is on parade in the passion of Christ are all of the things belonging to the disorder and the disarray of our humanity as made visible in him. Her "*fiat mihi*" is not, however, some sort of shrug of the shoulder, some sort of concession to fatalism, the "*whatever*" of contemporary culture which means '*who cares? I don't*', the quality of indeterminacy and indifference. No. Her reply signals the very nature of the Church and never more so than in deep Lent.

We, quite literally, *hang upon the very words of Christ*, hanging upon the very words of him who goes to hang upon the cross for us and for our salvation. He comes and he goes "*to give his life a ransom for many.*" Let that "*be unto [us]*" for it is "*for us.*" But only if we attend to it and let the immensity of this mystery arrest our attention.

We know this but its meaning remains veiled and hidden from our eyes. The idea of ransom and substitution, of someone taking the place of another, suffering for another, dying and suffering for us, seems utterly foreign and strange. And yet it belongs to the deeper logic of our life together as a body, as a community. For all our pretense of

independence and self-sufficiency, we do not live alone and simply for ourselves. That is the way of death and it belongs to Passiontide to help us to see more clearly the ignorant and deadly folly of our ways, that, indeed, we "*know not what [we] do.*"

Only in contemplating our unknowing can we begin to come to know; knowing that we do not know is the beginning of our knowing. We are not left without educational direction and guidance however. *The Letter to the Hebrews* signals the meaning of what is seen but not fully understood. "*By his own blood, he entered in once to the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us.*" "*He is the Mediator of the new covenant.*" How "*by his own blood*" and how is he "*the Mediator*"? By what comes to us through Mary, namely, Christ the Incarnate Son, "*of her flesh he took flesh*"; he is both God and Man, no true *Mediator* otherwise, no possibility of "*eternal redemption*" otherwise.

Passiontide presents us with the paradox of suffering and glory. It reveals the depths of human folly and wickedness, to be sure, things we would rather not see or think. That might seem to be a rather negative truth and one that contrasts with the gentleness of Christ's rebuke, if rebuke it is, to the ambitions of the mother of Zebedee's sons. The point is that a glory awaits us but in far different terms that what we might imagine. Hence the profounder truth of Mary's response to the divine initiative without which the Lord is not with her and through her with us. She, indeed, "*mothers each new grace*" if we attend to the word which defines her and the truth of all our humanity with her.

"*Mary Immaculate*", the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins says of her,

*merely a woman, yet
whose presence, power is
Great as no goddess's
Was deemèd, dreamèd; who
This one work has to do –
Let all God's glory through,
God's glory which would go
Through her and from her flow
Off, and no way but so.*

"We are wound/ With mercy round and round/ As if with air." That is the mercy of Christ in his Passion for us, the mercy conveyed through the mother of mercy, Mary who *"holds high motherhood/towards all our ghostly good/ And plays in grace her part/About man's beating heart."* To learn that mercy is the joy of Passiontide. *"Let all God's glory through"* but only if we like Mary learn to say *"be it unto me according to thy word,"* the word of him who seeks all our good, our good in knowing his goodwill and love towards us.

"Be it unto me according to thy word"

Passion Sunday, March 25th, 2012



Fra Angelico, Annunciation, Florence

“Be it unto me according to thy word”

Palm Sunday is a day of striking contrasts conveyed through conflicting words. Our words are in contradiction with our hearts. Palm Sunday marks the beginning of the most intense and disturbing spectacle, dare I say, that we shall ever see, all the world's holocausts, genocides, slaughters, violence and wickednesses notwithstanding. You see, Palm Sunday is for us, in all of the confusions and contradictions of the western democratic societies which we inhabit, the most alarming counter-cultural spectacle that we shall ever face. It is not new, of course. Sadly, it has been cheapened by our familiar customs, perhaps, as if it were a mere cultural phenomenon. As if we are simply going through the motions of 'we have always done this' without thinking for half-a-second just what this week we call Holy Week really means.

On the other hand, the willful retreat by so many from the life and witness of the Church to the Gospel of Jesus Christ speaks volumes about a message that you have not

received though it has been completely before you. It has nothing to do with the sad and pathetic banalities of our criticisms and complaints about one another, the various and mean defenses and accusations that we hurl at one another to avoid ourselves and the picture of ourselves which Palm Sunday presents and which is revealed more fully in Holy Week which Palm Sunday inaugurates.

No. Holy Week provides the picture, year in and year out, of a very profound truth about ourselves and one which we do everything in our power to avoid. We don't want to see this picture of ourselves but, truth be spoken, you and I are in utter contradiction with ourselves, you and I in ourselves are hell. And only this week, at least in the meaning of this week, can offer us something more than the hell of ourselves. But, paradoxically, it may seem, only by going through the hell of ourselves in the pageant of Christ's passion for us. Only through our seeing the forms of hell in ourselves can we begin to understand the joy of human redemption. Holy Week bids us contemplate the contradictions and confusions of our hearts and minds.

For the therapeutic culture, this is a cure too hard to bear for the simple reason that it puts the onus completely on us. It is entirely about each of us in our relation to the words which are spoken and heard, words proclaimed so as to be received. Will we be like Mary and say, *"be it unto me according to thy word"*? For that is, in a way, the peculiar challenge and joy of Holy Week, to let the words we hear be felt in us. To feel the words. To find ourselves in the story, in the spectacle of this week both for good and for ill. Therein lies the challenge.

There is a wonderful paradox. Mary says, *"be it unto me according to thy word."* And yet, so many of the words of Holy Week are our words, our words in confusion and disarray, our words against God and against one another, our words of betrayal and deceit, of sorrow and despair. Today we say, *"Hosanna to the Son of David; Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord"*. But then we turn around and say *"Crucify, Crucify,"* crucify Christ, crucify our Lord! Put God to death. Annihilate God from the horizon of our minds. For that is the meaning of Christ's crucifixion. And, yet, these are our words, our words that are in complete contradiction with ourselves. What does it mean for us, then, to say, *"be it unto me according to thy word"*?

In a way, it is the challenge of this week. The challenge is to see our words of hope and hatred, our words of complaint and criticism, our words of delusion and insight, our words of violence and destruction, our words of treachery and betrayal as embraced and comprehended in the words of divine compassion which are both seen and heard on the Cross of Good Friday. Only then will we begin to understand the full and true import of Mary's *"be it unto me according to thy word."*

It means to contemplate and begin *to feel every word* in this week of words, this week of actions extreme and unspeakable, and, yet, words which must be spoken and actions that must be done, if ever we will learn. This week of Christ's passion is where the whole sorry truth of our humanity is completely and exhaustively on display, when we contemplate the hell of ourselves without which there can be no heaven, no good.

Mary's 'yes' to God commits us to the discipline of this week. It commits us to be with him who wills to be with us in all of the confusions and contradictions of our messed up souls and lives. Something begins this day which we cannot ignore. Something begins this day which finds its completion at Easter which itself is utterly meaningless, except in the most superficial way of flowers, bunnies and bonnets, apart from the heart-rending, soul-agonizing spectacles of this week; if we have hearts and souls, that is to say. And perhaps, that is the question for our world and day, and for our church and parish.

It belongs to great literature and to the truths of the great religions that they not only teach us how to think and how to act but also how to feel. Holy Week concentrates such lessons for us on how to feel in the most intense manner imaginable. In our Anglican tradition we confront the Passion of Christ in all of its fullness, if we are willing to embrace the discipline of this week in the proclamation of the Passion from all four Evangelists. It begins today. There is something emotionally, intellectually and spiritually intense about this week.

It all comes down to the weight of Mary's response to the angelic messenger, "*be it unto me according to thy word.*" Are we willing to confront the spectacle of our own confusions as embraced by God's grace? Only so will we begin to learn what it means to live "*according to thy word.*" To feel the words of this week is to enter into Christ's passion for us. We are in this story. It is our story and God's. The challenge of Holy Week is to know ourselves in our hopes and our despairs, in our follies and our desires, but above all else to know the love of God that alone can heal and

restore. Only so can the hell of ourselves become the heaven of God in us.

“Be it unto me according to thy word”

Palm Sunday



Russian Icon, 14th century

“Be it unto me according to thy word”

Mary’s word in response to God’s word to her through the angel Gabriel provides the interpretative principle for our Holy Week pilgrimage. At Evening Prayer on Palm Sunday, the lesson from *Isaiah* (Is. 52.13-53 end) presents us with the picture of the suffering servant. At once, Israel, in the discovery of her vocation *“to be a light to lighten the gentiles”*, a vocation to be God’s chosen people for all people precisely through the experience of suffering, the image of the suffering servant is understandably transferred to Christ in his passion. Jesus, we might say, is the suffering servant. And in Luke’s memorable phrase,

“all the people hung upon his words” (Lk. 19.48). There is something captivating and compelling about the spectacle of Christ’s passion. It has precisely to do with the way in which the images of the Jewish Passover are transformed into something new and strange.

Holy Week begins with Palm Sunday, with the accounts of Matthew and Luke about Christ’s triumphant entry into Jerusalem and the growing sense of foreboding and unease about what this will mean. The Passover is the great Jewish celebration of the liberation of the children of the Hebrews from Pharaoh’s oppressive yoke in Egypt. At Morning Prayer on Palm Sunday, we are reminded of the Passover of the first-born, that striking illustration of the divine power that discerns the first-born of man and beast, passing over only the first-born of the Hebrews, *“that you may know that the Lord makes a distinction between the Egyptians and Israel”* (Exodus 11. 7). This week will challenge us about ourselves, about our inmost selves, about the commitments and principles that define us and defeat us. *“A sword shall pierce through your own soul, also”*, Simeon had said to Mary upon the occasion of Christ’s Presentation in the Temple, *“that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed”* (Lk. 2.35). The intention of Holy Week is to reveal the thoughts of our hearts to us.

“The Lord looks on the heart”, it is famously said, *“man looks on the outward appearance”* (1 Sam. 16.6). Holy Week shows us what is within our hearts, the heart that God sees, the God *“unto whom all hearts [are] open”* (BCP, p.67). It is not always a pretty picture. But how can we learn what is within our hearts? Only by hanging upon the words of Christ, quite literally hanging upon the Scriptures that are read and understood through the critical matrix of Christ’s

Passion in this week which we call Holy Week. Somehow our hearts can be revealed to us in all of their darkness and disarray without us being completely destroyed by what we see and hear. Or rather, perhaps, by our being destroyed and then recreated, by our dying and rising in the one who hangs upon the Cross and whose words convict our hearts and minds of our sinfulness and whose words convince us of his triumph of love and goodness over ourselves, over sin and evil.

Palm Sunday begins with the joy of the Passover celebration of divine liberation from Egyptian slavery. Easter ends with the greater joy of the redemption of our humanity in Christ's Resurrection. In between lies the pageant of the Passion in which we behold the one who is pierced for us and find, perhaps, that a sword has pierced through our own souls too, revealing the thoughts of our hearts, and even more, revealing the heart of God in whom alone we may find our peace and joy. But only if we hang upon the words of Christ's Passion. And only if we like Mary can say and pray, *"be it unto me according to thy word."*

"Be it unto me according to thy word"

Palm Sunday, Evening Prayer



Simone Martini & Lippo Memmi (1333)

“Be it unto me according to thy word”

Mary’s word to God frames our reflections upon Christ’s Passion this Holy Week. The accounts of the Passion are read in their fullness from all four Gospels during this week. On Monday in Holy Week we begin *The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ According to St. Mark* and conclude his account of the Passion on Tuesday.

The beginning of the Passion according to St. Mark is framed by the story of a woman having a box of ointment of spikenard which is broken open and used to anoint Jesus’ head and by the story of Peter’s weeping upon the realization that he has betrayed Jesus. In a way, the tears of

Peter and the outpouring of the spikenard signal the only good things that we can say about our humanity on this day. For in between lies all of the deceit and folly, compromise and violence, miscarriage of justice and forms of convenience, not to mention betrayal, that belong to the untruth and darkness of our human hearts. Not a pretty picture, we must say. The thoughts of many hearts are indeed revealed to us.

What the woman does at the beginning of the Mark's account of the Passion occasions complaint. The disciples murmur against her. Yet, Jesus is very direct. *"Let her alone; why trouble ye her? 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 hath done what she could; she is come aforehand to anoint my body to the burying."* A powerful passage, it convicts our hearts about our judgments and criticisms of one another and about our neglect of those who are in need in our communities. *"The poor ye have with you always and whensoever ye will ye may do them good."* This states, it seems to me the true basis of our charitable actions. Jesus here connects those actions with what the woman has done to him. The anointing foreshadows his death and burial. It is, he is saying, a good work that she has done that is to be celebrated and remembered, indeed, *"throughout the whole world."* It, too, is an act of love. It is a kind of worship.

The wonder of the beginning of Mark's Passion is that the beginning scene and the end scene are not about words. The woman with the alabaster box of ointment of spikenard says nothing; Peter in the end scene, *"call[s] to mind the word that Jesus said unto him"*, and *"when he thought thereon, he wept"*. No words. In between lie all manner of

words of betrayal and harm, words of folly and hatred. The woman's words are in her action; Peter's repentance, too, is without words, only tears. Both the ointment and the tears arise out of a broken box, on the one hand, and a broken heart, on the other hand. In both cases there is the foreshadowing of the breaking open of the body of Christ and the breaking open of the heart of God.

May it be so even unto us according to this word, learning to honour Christ in his death and resurrection for us and honouring him in our service of the poor and in the sacrifice of our tears of repentance.

“Be it unto me according to thy word”

Monday in Holy Week



Leonardo da Vinci (c. 1472)

“Be it unto me according to thy word”

Mary’s word of response to God provides a chilling and yet intriguing commentary on the heart of *The Passion According to St. Mark*. At the heart of the Passion, we have the most notorious and most difficult word of Christ from the Cross, the only word from the Cross that Mark and Matthew, too, pass on to us. It is the word that troubles us most and grieves our hearts, as it should. *“Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabachthani.” “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?”* It is heart-breaking.

At once a question, it is one of the dozen or so Aramaic phrases in the New Testament and yet it is actually a transliterated quote from the Psalms, from Psalm 22. The only word of the Crucified Christ in two of the canonical gospels, it must give us pause to consider and weigh its import and message. How is this word *according to thy word*? And yet, how can it be understood in any other way? It captures precisely if indeed somewhat terrifyingly the meaning of Christ’s Passion. He has entered into the land of the darkness of human hearts, of our refusal and denial of God himself. The statement of the Psalmist is testimony to the sense of being bereft and abandoned; in a way, this is the true reality and result of sin. That we don’t see it is because of our own weakness and blindness; paradoxically, because of our own sinfulness. Christ sees it and names it from within the experience of the moment, the moment of utter estrangement and remove from the Father. But note, not from God.

This is, it seem to me, the interesting point. At the moment of extreme duress and pain and agony, the Crucified Christ cries out. He cries out to God. He voices, in the

words of the Psalmist, his distress and the existential meaning of his situation. This is the most supreme and, perhaps, the greatest example of *'the situated individual'*. But note as well the point that Christ cries out to God and that his cry is, unambiguously, a prayer. Jesus teaches us how to feel by his words of the most intense feeling imaginable. It is not by accident that it is a word from the Psalms. The Psalms, we may say, supremely and intensely teach us how to feel.

The cry of dereliction complements in a way Mary's 'yes' to God. That yes does not imply or require, let alone demand, an easy ride, a pleasant journey. No. It really relates more to what Jesus says here, namely, a calling out to God, an acknowledgment of God even in the form of an agonizing question, even one which may seem to be accusatory. His cry is the agony of the Saviour who seeks our good through our incapacity both to think and feel his goodness. He feels utterly abandoned. In a way, he is. There is, after all, nothing that we can do to overcome what has separated us from God. All that we can do is contemplate the heavenly grace of Christ's passion. He names the condition of human sinfulness. It is about being cut off from God. Sin denies God. That is its truth and its folly.

The Crucified is, indeed, the God forsaken. He has, indeed, gone into the far away land of dissimilitude, the land of unlikeness, the land of the most intense form of estrangement from all that matters most. Like the prodigal son, who in coming to himself, recognizes that he is no longer worthy to be called a son, so here, the Son of God cries out, not to the Father, but at least to God. The intimacy of the former relationship is seemingly (and

frighteningly) eclipsed by the experience of the meaning of sin. It means the utter estrangement and separation from God. *"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"* And yet, even in the agony of the Crucifixion, there is profoundly a cry, a prayer, to God. It is, we might say, testimony to the righteousness of the Son, to his truth and love for us. He cries out to God in the moment of the experience of being God-forsaken.

He bears our agony. He bears all that belongs to the suffering servant of ancient Israel. He bears and expresses, in all of the intensity of sin's self-imposed alienation from truth imaginable, precisely the full meaning of Mary's word, *"Be it unto me according to thy word."* For it means suffering. *"A sword shall pierce through thine own soul also."* Christ wills to suffer the full meaning of sin's estrangement from God. The Word and Son of the Father quotes from the Word of God written. Nothing could capture more completely the agony of the Crucifixion. Nothing, too, can capture more completely, what it means to feel the agony, to feel the Passion. That is what makes the word here so compelling.

That sense of the compelling nature of Christ's word of dereliction is captured most wondrously in the word of the Centurion looking upon these events, the word of a bystander, the word of one who to all appearances has no vested interest in these affairs of state. And yet, his word of response, like Mary's word to the angel, expresses exactly the sense of what is universal and for all time in this story, if we have the capacity to feel it, to feel exactly what the Centurion, this Roman soldier, felt and expressed. His word complements the word of the Crucified and the word of Mary. *"Truly,"* he says, *"this*

man was the Son of God." It is the word which is drawn out of him because of what he has seen and heard.

His word restores the sense of Sonship to the experience of the Crucified. *"Truly this man was the Son of God."* It is a powerful testimony to the divine will which embraces the depths of despair and desolation, the sense of utter dereliction. And yet, this unknown and unnamed soldier has grasped and glimpsed the inner reality and truth of this moment. He has, we might say, felt its truth and meaning. He has named the greater truth. *"Truly this man was the Son of God."* What he is has expressed captures the deeper meaning of the Passion. It is, and can only be *"according to thy word"*, the word of the Father, however dark and despairing that experience may be. Here we glimpse already something of the sense of glory in the very heart of suffering. It is there in the response of the Centurion to the Crucified Christ. It arises, we might say, all in accordance with thy word.

"Be it unto me according to thy word"

Tuesday in Holy Week



“Be it unto me according to thy word”

Tenebrae, meaning shadows or darkness, is the great Psalm Office that anticipates the *Triduum Sacrum* of Holy Week, the three great holy days of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday which culminate in the mystery of Easter, the mystery of the Resurrection. The theme of anticipation is intriguing and not a little confusing, perhaps, though it has to do precisely with the deeper meaning of the form of our participation in Christ’s passion. The drama of salvation is more than a narrative tale. The Passion is about the way God addresses the radical disorder of our humanity; darkness and shadows indeed, and yet bearing a wondrous grace. *“Thou’ hast light in dark”* and *“immensity cloistered in thy dear womb”* as the poet, John Donne says about Mary in his poem, entitled *Annunciation*, and about her place in the drama of human redemption. A wondrous grace indeed.

And, perhaps, nowhere is that idea of “*light in dark*” seen more compellingly and yet more gently than in Luke’s account of the Passion which we begin to read on the Wednesday in Holy Week. That we read it along with one of the most theologically challenging and exciting passages from *The Letter to the Hebrews* only heightens the sense of Mary’s word, “*be it unto me according to thy word.*” The conjunction between Luke and Hebrews through the critical matrix of Mary’s response is remarkable and, I think, most compelling. By word I mean something more than just what is spoken or written; it is also about understanding and meaning; in short, something theological, something that pertains to the *logos* of God.

“*Christ is the Mediator of the new covenant*” the *Letter to the Hebrews* states, a new covenant initiated “*by means of death,*” a new covenant that is quite literally and metaphorically about *blood*, a word which appears seven times in the epistle reading. The point is dramatically captured in the arresting phrase, “*without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.*” Human redemption is about the divine forgiveness bestowed upon a wayward and foolish humanity steeped in violence and folly and wickedness. But there is a cost. There is blood.

What could be more graphic, more disturbing? We find ourselves in a digital world where the respect for life and thus blood as a common symbol of life is almost lost and gone and where blood is but a cheap and common commodity. You can sell your blood. You can sell your body and parts of your body. This vulgar exchange is but a vile parody of the infinite exchange that belongs to human redemption. We are, of course, as a church, utterly silent

about such troubling forms of exchange, about the ways in which we turn ourselves and one another into mere commodities, about the way, too, in which God himself is cheapened into a commodity. The Passion of Christ is about the infinite exchange of the sacrifice of Christ for us. It costs. It cost "*the heart-blood of the Son of God to redeem us,*" as Jeremy Taylor notes.

The Letter to the Hebrews provides us with a necessary reflection on the radical meaning of Christ's sacrifice. And yet, the real power of this day may be found in Luke's account of the Passion, and in particular about *the agony of Gethsemane*. Nothing could be more poignant, more compelling, and more touching than that scene. It is about blood, yes, but only in a metaphorical and symbolical sense. It is really about the profound literary and theological sensibility of Luke. Dante is only too right in calling Luke the Evangelist, the *scriba mansuetudinis Christi*, the scribe of the gentleness of Christ. And yet what a disturbing gentleness! Luke gives us the most interior view of the heart of Christ. That alone breaks our hearts, I fear, and I hope! For only so can we be redeemed. "*Make me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me,*" as David puts it in Psalm 51, the great Penitential Psalm of Lent which is part of our Tenebrae service.

Luke alone gives us this fuller understanding of Mary's *fiat mihi*. What Mary says at the *Annunciation* anticipates (there is that concept, yet again) what belongs to Christ's Passion and to the logic and meaning of Christ's Incarnation. It is captured in this intimate and intense scene in the Garden of Gethsemane. "*Not my will, but thine be done*" as Luke has it, capturing in a way both Mary's response, "*according to*

thy word," and the Lord's Prayer, *"Thy will be done."* Yet only Luke gives us this precious and wonderful insight into the soul of Christ. *"His sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground."* Amazing and most troubling and, yet, how profoundly insightful. The heart of Christ is opened to view through the pen of Luke; it is a heart that beats passionately for our good and our salvation. It is a simile and yet one which captures something of the inner dynamic of the agony of Christ.

Sweat like blood, *"great drops of blood falling down to the ground."* It is a powerful image that captures so much of the idea of Christ's sacrifice for us, body broken and blood out-poured, to be sure, but all because of what is in his heart, broken open for us to read in Christ's Passion. Out of that heart sorely charged and in agony comes a deep and compassionate understanding of the weakness of our humanity. The Psalms of the Passion, too, bring out the range of human emotions that are on display in the accounts of the Passion. They, too, teach us how to feel.

Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane finds his disciples sleeping. In Luke's account, Jesus simply says, *"Why sleep ye? Rise and pray, lest ye enter into temptation."* We are then immediately thrown into the maelstrom of Judas' betrayal by a kiss and Christ's captivity and trial before the Sanhedrin. And then all the rest of the sad, sorry story of human violence, hatred, and betrayal unfolds. Yet Luke gives us this interior view of the human soul of Christ. The agony of Gethsemane is about the struggle in Christ's soul. The image of *"his sweat ... as it were great drops of blood"* portends the literal blood of his crucifixion; even more, the image makes visible the inner struggle of soul and body.

Luke makes us feel something of what Christ feels. It is a kind of psychological portrait of the moment.

Luke's portrayal of the struggle of Christ brings out the inner dynamic of the Passion. Christ does not simply suffer; he wills to suffer and to bear the burden of our sins. It is a suffering willingly embraced but it is not without a struggle, an agony which is the Greek word for struggle, and in a way, this heightens and increases the meaning of Mary's acquiescence to God for hers is not without a question, "*how shall this be seeing I know not a man.*" It belongs to the deep truth of our humanity that we are actively engaged in the redemptive process.

It is "*not my will, but thine be done*" and it is always "*according to thy word,*" both the word spoken and the word or doctrine understood and felt in the very heart of the Son of God. "*The light in dark.*"

"Be it unto me according to thy word"

Wednesday in Holy Week



“Be it unto me according to thy word”

“Whatsoever he tells you, do it.” This, too, is Mary’s word, and not altogether unlike her word of response to God at her Annunciation, but it is her word to us at the Wedding Feast in Cana of Galilee. A direction and a command, it follows upon her assessment of the human condition, *“they have no wine,”* she says. But Christ will provide for us, turning the water into wine, but not before his strange and disturbing word to Mary. *“O woman, what is that to you and to me. Mine hour has not yet come.”* And not before her direction and command, *“whatsoever he tells you, do it.”* It is, we might say, but a further extension of her word of response to God, *“be it unto me according to thy word.”* And as with her so with the Church, and so with us, especially in the week of Christ’s Passion.

Tonight, we meet in the Upper Room with the disciples and Jesus. It, too, is a celebratory event, a celebration of the Passover, a celebration with bread and wine in honour of God's deliverance of Ancient Israel from slavery in Egypt, a defining event in the culture of the religion of Judaism. But what strange and disturbing things are heard and seen in this Upper Room! "*Do this*", Jesus says, to us in the Upper Room; "*do this in remembrance of me.*" Defining words for Christians.

"*He carried himself in his own hands,*" Augustine notes, calling attention to the strange marvel of Maundy Thursday, reminding us of the strange wonder of Christ's words in the Upper Room. He identifies himself with the elements of the Passover Feast; the bread and the wine of the celebration of the Passover are spoken of here as his body and his blood, the bread and wine of liberation and salvation. What kind of provision is this and how shall we understand it?

Only through the unfolding of his hour. The hour which has not yet come now approaches, the hour of betrayal and trial, the hour of passion and death, the hour of crucifixion. In a way, what it means is already signaled here in the Upper Room. "*Take eat ...Drink this.*" "*Do this in remembrance of me.*" A form of remembrance that is equally about our participation in what is signified. And what is signified is his passion and crucifixion.

"*In the same night that he was betrayed*", this night, this very night, Christ gives himself into our hands. Maundy Thursday celebrates the significance of what he does and what he says. It is the new commandment, *novum mandatum*. "*A new commandment I give unto you that you love*

one another as I have loved you" But the word is also a deed, "*take eat, this is my body...this is my blood.*" How? By what he endures and wills to endure for us on the Cross of Good Friday. The Cross is present by anticipation; its sorrows already colour the joys of fellowship. All our betrayals are at hand. "*Do this*", he says, at once anticipating the full meaning of his own doing of his Father's will for us and for our salvation and, at the same time, providing for our continual benefit. We live for and from the sacrifice of Christ.

"Whatever he tells you to do, do it," Mary says. Far from being an encouragement to mindless obedience, it signifies the very meaning of the life of the Church. The task of Holy Week is to call to mind the words and deeds of Christ and to let those words define us even as God's word defines Mary. The purpose is to contemplate, in the proclamation of the Passion, all that belongs to the spectacle of Christ crucified, all that belongs to what he wills to do for us. That is the point. The new commandment is not only proclaimed; it is enacted in the very sacrifice of Christ for us.

And our response? To do as he has done for us; for it to be unto us according to his word. "*Do this*" is his word. "*Do this,*" he says, because to eat and drink the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ is not simply about our taking; it is about our willing what Christ has willed and done for us. What he wills is at the heart of what he does; he wills to bear our betrayals of his love.

At the heart of the new commandment to love is love in action; here at the Passover meal and, there, tomorrow, on the Cross. All of the events of the *Triduum Sacrum* show

forth the love of Christ. They compel us. But only by way of our remembrance, by way of our calling to mind the hour of Christ. Only so can we participate in what he does for us.

Every celebration of the Holy Eucharist, recalls us to that hour and its meaning. Here *“in the same night that he was betrayed”*, he anticipates his passion and its meaning for us sacramentally, carrying himself in his own hands, as it were, and giving himself into our hands, our hands of betrayal and deceit, our hands of cruelty and death. The new commandment to love compels us to lives of sacrifice and service, the sacrifice and service which he exemplifies and provides for us so that it may live in us. But only if we will what he wills for us, to do in remembrance of him, even as Mary has told us, *“whatever he tells you do it”*, but even more as Mary herself has said, *“be it unto me according to thy word.”*

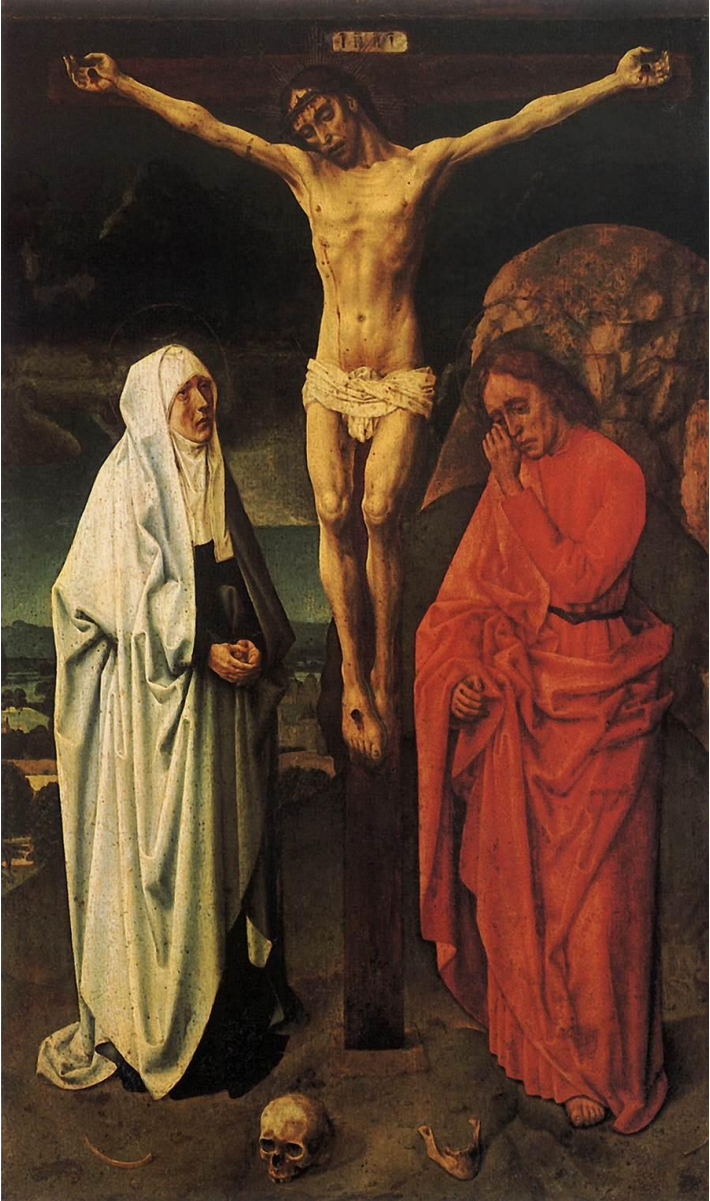
“Be it unto me according to thy word”

Maundy Thursday



John William Waterhouse, 1914

Good Friday



Hugo Van der Goes (c. 1470)

“Be it unto me according to thy word”

Mary’s word brings us ultimately to the Cross, to the words of the Crucified. The conjunction of the Annunciation with Passiontide heightens the interplay of Christ’s coming to us through her and Christ’s going from us through his death on the Cross. Her word connects to his words, his last words, we might say, and provides us with a critical and interpretative way of pondering them.

Mary’s word is her ‘yes’ to the divine will and purpose for our humanity. That is accomplished on the Cross in the humanity which Christ assumes from her. She is the true and pure source of Jesus’ humanity, soul and body, without which there can be no passion, no death, and no redemption. At the heart of the Passion is the same intensity of commitment and willingness to suffer for the will of God, for the will of the Father.

Good Friday. It is a paradox. Christ is crucified and dies – a kind of judicial murder and yet one in which we are all, in some sense or another, totally implicated. *“Were you there when they crucified the Lord?”* as the old spiritual so strongly, eloquently and rightly expresses it. A rhetorical question to which the answer, though unstated, is yes; we were there, we are in the story! That is the point without which there can be no good for any of us on this day. And yet, this darkness of the human heart on this day is the occasion for what is precisely called good. Good Friday.

The good of this day lies entirely in the will to good, the will to will God’s will that alone can triumph over all sin and wickedness. That is the full meaning of Mary’s *“be it*

unto me according to thy word". Yet it has its fullest expression and meaning in Christ's willingness to embrace our brokenness and folly, our sins and wickedness in himself out of nothing more and nothing less than his love of the Father, out of nothing more and nothing less than the love of God.

But what are such theological musings to you and to me? How does it change anything in our own poor, pathetic and miserable lives? Where's the good in Good Friday, I am sure we ask? Well it means everything and changes everything. How? Good Friday teaches us that there is nothing that lies outside the love of God. God himself embraces our deaths and our dying. There is a kind of marvel at work in this. God empties himself even. In so doing, God, who never ceases to be God, yet becomes more God, if one could possibly apply more or less to God who is far beyond such finite calculations. That of course is the point. That is the marvel of the Crucifixion. God embraces our nothingness. Sin is nothing, after all, pure negation. It is the dogmatic and willful antagonism against all that is, the refusal to accept our creatureliness and by extension the Creator. And yet, God embraces this emptiness and futility and makes something out of it. Only God can make something out of nothing. Creation and Redemption.

The marvel of Good Friday is the nothingness of God. God embraces the nothingness that we have chosen. Oh, I know we can easily get caught up in the whole pile-on-the-guilt-trip stuff as if that were the purpose and meaning of Good Friday. No. The purpose of Good Friday is not so much about ourselves and about feeling bad about ourselves but rather about our capacity (or incapacity!) to feel the love,

poignant and heart-rending as it is, of Christ. To see in the agony of the Cross, Christ's deep love for our humanity. It is quite a challenge. Our sins are, in some real sense, the occasion of his Crucifixion, but Christ's willing acceptance of our faults and failings, our follies and nonsense, transforms our sins and makes them the occasion of something profound. It is captured on the Cross in the words from John's Gospel. John gives us three of the seven last words. John's Gospel is read on Good Friday. His Gospel, too, has been the formative part of the Office readings throughout Holy Week, too. It is not too much to say that Holy Week is according to the word of John's Gospel!

"Woman, behold thy son. Then saith he to the disciple, behold thy mother." "I thirst". "It is finished". Powerful words. Christ's thirst is at once physical and immediate, real, we would say. This is actually serious and suggestive. All of the Scriptural images of water and wine and all of the images of desert emptiness and drought meet in this word. Christ's word is also profoundly spiritual and moral; it encompasses the moral pursuit of the good and the intellectual pursuit of what is true and holy. Christ thirsts, it is not too much to say, for our good and our salvation. He does so through our humanity, in the body and soul which he has taken from Mary. And John *alone* gives us the one word of Christ to his mother in the agony of his crucifixion.

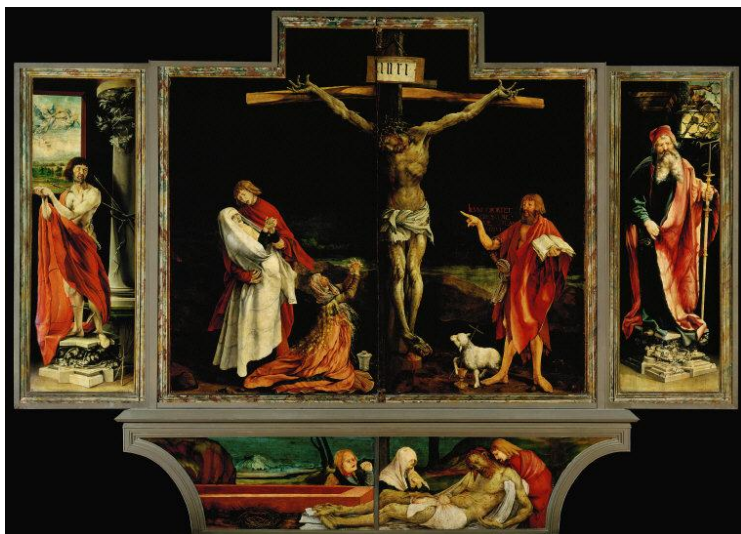
He thirsts for our good and that is accomplished, finished, in his death on the Cross. The last word from John is about completion and perfection with respect to what has been undertaken. *"It is finished."* Christ has come to do the will of him who sent him, to do according to the will of the

Father, to do according to the divine will, we might say. And now it is finished but only because of his deep thirst, read love, for our good and blessedness.

How does this apply to us? *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled.”* The Cross is ultimately our satisfaction. Christ, having satisfied all that belongs to setting right our wounded and broken world, provides us not with a blue-print for action but instead a way of thinking. He thirsts for our good and he accomplishes it on the Cross. Such is the blessedness, the Good in Good Friday.

And it is not too much to say that it is all because of Mary’s word, *“be it unto me according to thy word.”*

Good Friday



Matthias Grünewald, Isenheim Altarpiece, (c. 1512-1515)

“Be it unto me according to thy word”

The radical nature of Mary’s word in response to God appears not only in the terrible intensity of Good Friday but also in the quiet peace of Holy Saturday. Through her word we have endeavoured to consider the creedal elements of human redemption. The crucified Christ dies and is buried. Holy Saturday reflects on the grave and death of Christ. In a way, everything is at peace since all that belongs to the overcoming of all that separates God and man has been accomplished on the Cross. *“It is finished,”* as Jesus says in John’s account of the Passion.

But there is one further creedal element that belongs to the Passion and which is a further consequence of Mary’s ‘yes’ to God. It is the Descent into Hell. The readings on Holy Saturday take us to the grave but they also present to us this arresting idea and image of Christ *“[going] and preach[ing] unto the spirits in prison,”* as the Epistle reading from 1 Peter 3 puts it, and of the radical nature of *“the blood of the covenant”* which *“will set your captives free from the waterless pit,”* bringing salvation to the *“prisoners of hope,”* as Zechariah suggests. And as the Mattins lesson from 1 Peter 2 suggests, not only are we healed by his wounds but we are *“returned unto the shepherd and bishop of our souls.”* The radical nature of that return is represented to us on this day and in ways that relate directly to Mary’s ‘yes’.

Her word of obedience and acquiescence to the divine will is seen classically in the commentary tradition to redress and counter the disobedience of Eve in the story of the Fall in the Book of Genesis. Her ‘ave’ contrasts and counters the woes of our humanity derived from the folly of the Fall in Eve’s tempting Adam and his yielding to her.

In the iconographic traditions of Eastern Orthodoxy, Holy Saturday marks Christ's Descent into Hell to redeem the prisoners of hope and depicts Christ as raising Adam and Eve out of the pit. Hell here is seen not simply as a place of everlasting punishment but as the place of departed spirits who are in a kind of limbo or holding pattern awaiting the accomplishment of human redemption by God in Christ, waiting in hope for God's redemption of our humanity. The whole story of the Old Testament is about a kind of hope for peace, for righteousness, for holiness that is entirely predicated upon the idea of the peace of God, which passeth human understanding, the righteousness of God, which is about God's ways which are not our ways, and the holiness of God, from which all that is holy derives.

Christ's Descent into Hell shows the full extent of the divine will to be reconciled with the whole of his sinful creation. That Christ goes and preaches to the spirits in prison suggests, too, that it is always and for all "*according to thy word,*" the redemptive word who has embraced the full meaning of our sins and our deaths even to the grave and to the depths of the Jewish Sheol or Greek Hades, terms which contribute to the later depictions of Hell. Ultimately, Hell is about our separation and remove from God. The creedal principle of the Descent into Hell emphasizes the divine will to reconcile and redeem and to restore and unite. It shows us something of the total and all-embracing nature of the love of God. Nothing, not even death can defeat God's love. "*O death where is thy sting?*" Indeed.

In Mary's Annunciation, as the poet John Donne suggests, Christ wills to "*lie in prison, in thy womb.*" It is part of the

paradox of redemption that God who cannot be contained to the limits of time and space wills to be contained and confined in the womb of Mary. In the imagery of Holy Saturday and Easter, the tomb becomes the womb of new life. Christ enters Mary's womb even as he enters the tomb and goes forth from both. Life and light triumph over death and darkness. Mary's 'yes' is an instrumental and substantial aspect of redemption and signals the nature of our participation in the pageant of salvation.

On Holy Saturday we gather at the tomb in the peace and the quiet of the day when all the world is at peace with God. But already the full meaning of God's reconciling love is at work in his Descent into Hell to bring out the prisoners from the tomb and to gather all things into his love for the Father in the bond of the Holy Spirit. It is, we may say, all *"according to thy word"* by which God reconciles himself so fully and completely with our sinful humanity and indeed with the whole world.

"Be it unto me according to thy word"

Holy Saturday



“Be it unto me according to thy word”

The Vigil of Easter is most emphatically *“according to thy word,”* the word of prophecy and hope, the word of prayer and praise, the word of expectant excitement, and, above all else, the word of renewal and re-creation. The Vigil is all about our waiting upon the divine word, like Mary pondering the words that were spoken about the child Christ. We wait at the grave but we wait expectantly, waiting upon the word which called all things into being and now recalls everything to its truth and principle. It is by all accounts a new creation.

What we await is not about a return to Paradise. There can be no going back. No. What we await is something more, paradise plus, perhaps, for the creation as renewed and restored cannot mean the forgetting of all the folly and wickedness of the human experience, past, present and future. Indeed, the Resurrection presents to us the radical nature of our disobedience in order for us to consider the greater power of divine love. In other words, we await God’s new creative act in a spirit of anticipation, in a mode of holy expectancy. Why and how? Because of God’s word to us. We wait just as Mary waited for her time to come. We are waiting upon God in the knowledge of God that has been revealed to us.

It is not presumption but holy waiting. It is an essentially Marian attitude of faith best captured in her word, *“be it unto me according to thy word.”* We await expectantly as based on the witness of Scripture and the hope in God that arises from the strength and glory of ancient Israel. We await the great something new that will be wonder and

delight, peace and joy abounding unto glory. Our waiting must be like Mary, a waiting that is always *“according to thy word.”*

“Be it unto me according to thy word”

Easter Vigil



Giotto, 1305

“Be it unto me according to thy word”

Mary’s word to God at the Annunciation has provided us with a way of contemplating the Passion of Christ throughout Passiontide and Holy Week. Her word signals the most profound idea and reality. God engages our humanity in the most intimate manner imaginable in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. In the Christian understanding of things, the Incarnation has its beginning in time with the Annunciation which marks the conception of Christ in the womb of Mary. The larger significance of that is the greater celebration of this day, Easter.



Christ is risen, Alleluia. Alleluia!
The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia. Alleluia!

For Mary’s word signals her affirmation of God’s new creative act, the act of redemption. The Resurrection is the new and radical recreation of our humanity. Such is the joy

of the Annunciation in the blessedness of God being with us through Mary but there is the even greater joy of the Resurrection in the renewing of our creation, hence all our alleluias on this day!

New life and new birth, the triumph and overcoming of all sin and folly, marks the celebration and meaning of Easter. And, in a way, all because of Mary's word to God. It signals our task as well. What is that? To let the word of the Risen Christ define us; to let his word be unto us; to let Christ teach us the great good news of his Resurrection. Why? Because it defines our Christian identity and witness. Because it is about the radical truth of God's being with us. Because the Resurrection celebrates the divine purpose for our humanity.

Death and Resurrection. These are the two basic and fundamental principles that define Christian witness and Christian life. We have had them wonderfully and graphically and dramatically presented to us in our service this morning. In the baptisms of *Kayla* and her daughters *Savannah* and *Hailey* we are reminded in the strongest possible way of our Christian identity and profession. It is, like Mary, "*according to [God's] word,*" the word which engages our humanity in the intimacy of Jesus Christ and goes to the Cross for us and for our salvation. Christ's Resurrection is the strongest possible reminder that we are more, though not less, than dust and death, more, though not less, than our physical and material bodies. They are all part of the story, the story that is about God's will to restore and recreate, to transform and renew.

Christ's Resurrection affirms both the spiritual nature of all reality and the spiritual nature of our humanity. We are

spiritual creatures, created beings who think and love. Such things recall us to the God in whose image we are made and now remade and renewed, restored and redeemed.

Baptism is about our incorporation into the very life of Christ, the very purpose of God's new creation. In Baptism we are made "*the children of God, the inheritors of the Kingdom of Heaven and members of the body of Christ.*" This is who we are. We have now only to live it and to live it "*according to thy word,*" the word of the one who has created and redeemed us, the word of life and love.

The Resurrection is radical new life and marks the strongest possible affirmation of our individuality as well. In Baptism, we are named in God's own naming of himself as Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. We are named individually; we are signed with the sign of the Cross, that token of sin and love, that sign of God's redeeming grace and mercy. We are incorporated into the life of God; our bodies are an integral and important part of that new life and new reality. We live no longer simply for ourselves but for God and only so can we live for one another. Such is the triumph of love, the love which renews us in love.

It becomes the meaning and purpose to live this new and redeeming love in our lives with one another and in the communities where we are placed. It means to be defined by God's creative and redemptive word without which we are simply dead and dying spiritually and in every other way. Christ's Resurrection is the affirmation of the divine will and purpose for our humanity. God unites himself to us in Jesus Christ so that through his humanity we might

be who we are in God's will. It is "according to thy word," the word of God that conveys to us the will of God and nowhere more profoundly than on this day. Christ's triumph over sin and death signals our new creation. "Likewise reckon yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin," Paul says, "but alive unto God, through Jesus Christ our Lord."

God is life and light and love. We are given to see and feel these realities in Jesus Christ, in his Death and Resurrection for us accomplished in the very soul and body of our humanity.

The Easter message is about hope and life in the face of death and despair. It speaks to all of the confusions and complexities of our culture. The Easter message of Christ's Resurrection counters the despairing and deadening fatalisms of our world and day. Our hope cannot be found in the ups and downs of human experience but only in God, the God who renews and recreates. We find in the Easter message, I hope, the strength and the joy of living with God in the midst of all that confronts us, in the face of each and every hardship. It means to learn to rejoice in the God who is Creator and Redeemer. Christ's Resurrection gives us the grace to see ourselves and one another and even our world in a new way.

As always it seems to me, the poets understand this best of all. Gerard Manley Hopkins shows us something of what Christ's Resurrection means for each of us.

*I am all at once what Christ is, since he was
what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood,
immortal diamond,
Is immortal diamond.*

It has altogether to do with our life in Christ, he in us and we in him, to his glory and our everlasting good. It is, as Mary's word signifies, "*according to thy word.*" May it be so for each of us this day and for evermore. Live the Resurrection! Live it in the life of Christ and in his body, the Church. Alleluia! Alleluia!

"Be it unto me according to thy word"

Easter



Piero della Francesca (c. 1460)



Ambrogio Lorenzetti (c. 1344)