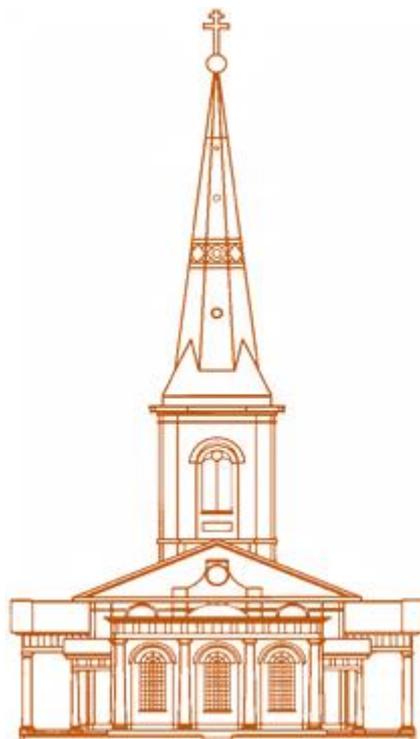


ST JAMES' ANGLICAN CHURCH,
KING STREET, SYDNEY, NSW



**HOLY WEEK AND
EASTER SERMONS
2017**

BY THE REVEREND CANON PROFESSOR SCOTT COWDELL

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He was Rector of All Saints', Chermside, in Brisbane, Farnham Maynard Lecturer in Theology at Trinity College, Melbourne, Principal of St Barnabas' Theological College, Adelaide and Rector of St Paul's, Manuka, in Canberra.

A longstanding Member of the Doctrine Commission and a former Editor of St Mark's Review, he has written eight books, including *God's Next Big Thing: Discovering the Future Church* (John Garratt, 2004), *Abiding Faith: Christianity Beyond Certainty, Anxiety, and Violence* (Cascade, 2009) and *René Girard and Secular Modernity: Christ, Culture, and Crisis* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2013).

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The Darkness of God?

Palm Sunday

Year A, 9 April 2017

Isaiah 50: 4-9a, Psalm 31: 9-18; Philippians 2: 5-11, Matthew 27: 1-54

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

“Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? That is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

(Matthew 27: 45-46).

Today our theme is darkness and God-forsakenness. And what more relevant theme could there be for so many people in today's Western world? The loss of a secure identity, of certainties from yesterday and hope for tomorrow, is spawning anxiety and anger everywhere. Brexit, the election of Trump, and the far right's rise in Australia reveal in public what's also true in private. From the angst of many girls and young women over body image, to the desperation of ice addiction, to the resignation of a generation that will never achieve home ownership, we see a frustrated sense of loss. Likewise, the inescapable sufferings of brute reality cast a pall of darkness and god-forsakenness over many lives. Every priest knows that personal loss and life's disappointments often leave people groping in the dark and feeling god-forsaken. We've learned to equate God's presence with security, confidence, success, happiness, insidership, to the extent that losing these fragile and fleeting comforts can seem like the death of God.

But I want to suggest a different take on all this, in light of today's readings. Here we find a God at work despite this darkness, and intimately present despite the sense of god-forsakenness. This is a message that the Christian mystical tradition has long emphasised, with its cloud of unknowing, with its deep and dazzling darkness. But it should be common property for all Christians, as we find it to be throughout scripture, and not least in our readings today.

I want to put a particular spin on this paradox of God's absence and presence today, in light of two great modern thinkers: Friedrich Nietzsche and René Girard. My insight is that the darkness of God, the eclipse of God, the god-forsakenness that's become a defining feature of modern secular experience, is in fact the death of an inadequate, older, human-centred view of God—a confected, sociological sacred, and not the real God at all. The god we miss today, who seems to have deserted us, is the god who helped unify a civilization, to identify and curse its necessary class of deviants, and to mark its outsiders, so that we knew who the insiders were. This god, now disappearing in darkness, once allowed us to have a common enemy, so that we could all feel unified. This was a god who underwrote our success, our insidership, our identity, our worth, allowing us to feel special—of course, by contrast with others who weren't.

In his book *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche offers his famous aphorism #125 about the death of what I think is this old god. It's a passage that's often misunderstood. Nietzsche's fictional madman comes into the town square, prophetically declaring that we've killed this old god, and that as a result we're bearing the consequences. We've lost the old certainties. Nietzsche's madman asks,

What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us?

René Girard argues that the god whose death Nietzsche declares is the old, sociological sacred which every human culture confects in its own way, but always to secure a stable unity at the expense of some targeted violence. The disappearance of this god is what Nietzsche laments, however, believing that through Christianity the modern West has lost something indispensable, something strong and violent, something Dionysian, which we need to get back. "What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent?", his madman asks.

But of course, the god Nietzsche wants back is far closer to the sacred pretensions of Hitler and the Third Reich than it is to the humility of Jesus who went to the cross, who emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, as we read in our epistle today. Nietzsche would have scorned the honest lament of today's psalm, too. And he'd make nothing of today's Isaiah reading—he'd think that the godly one, the contemplative, active teacher that Isaiah gives us there, the suffering servant, could only be deluded. As if knowing God could actually entail the weakness and shame of exile from the sacred circle; as if this darkness of God could be a blessing from God. No, we worship a different God. This is the God that Nietzsche rejected because he preferred the pagan Dionysus over the crucified Christ. Nietzsche knew that thanks to the Bible, and thanks especially to Jesus, the old gods have been culturally routed and undermined, and he's not happy about it. As far as he's concerned, we Christians have murdered the only god worth having. Hence the darkness and the god-forsakenness of our modern Western experience, because the strength and the violent certainty has all drained away.

Friends, as we hear Matthew's passion story today, we step into this darkness and God-forsakenness, and we're introduced to a different God, to the real God: the God of Isaiah, and the psalmist; the God of Jesus Christ. This is the God that Nietzsche despised, who he regards as having ruined everything, whose baleful influence needs to be expunged—and didn't we modern Westerners give that a red hot go in our blood-soaked twentieth century? I'm now going to take a walk with you through Matthew's passion narrative that was sung earlier, to show you what I mean.

Today's passion narrative is about human communities doing what comes naturally. Envy and rivalry are to the fore: we read that Pilate was well aware that envy on the part

of religious authorities had delivered Jesus to him. Indeed, the whole thing starts with Judas' failed bid to force Jesus' hand, to make him take on the system, the controlling nexus of culture and religion, only to realise that he'd got everything completely wrong. Judas, like Nietzsche, preferred the old, more violent god—but where Nietzsche went mad when he could no longer avoid Christ's claim, Judas hanged himself. And then, friends, with envy and escalating tensions, the obvious, age-old solution presents itself: let's lynch someone to unify the factions and to restore peace. So, we see the chief priests and elders actually whipping up the mob, calling for Barabbas to be released—even though he was a bandit, a terrorist—so that Jesus could be sacrificed.

Now isn't this interesting? Why release someone who's a real danger, and crucify someone who's non-violent? Why obsess about the relatively minor threat of terrorism while ignoring today's major threats of epidemic obesity, rampant youth suicide, nuclear weapons, and climate change? Why live with an acceptable level of corruption while typically scapegoating whistle blowers? Why tolerate child abusers among the clergy while driving out priests who upset key egos on parish council? Friends, it's all because we need the usual suspects to keep the system going. We can cope with terrorists, paedophiles and corrupt officials because they're so like the rest of us that by damning them we don't have to face the truth about ourselves. Whereas prophets show up the whole system, and leave us nowhere to hide. We can cope with difference, even welcome it, as long as it doesn't reveal that we're all really basically the same! And this is what we see in today's passion narrative: we see business as usual, with sacred wrath turned on Jesus while leaving the system in place—all its necessary structural rivalries, which are symbolized by Barabbas, are preserved.

Now, the difference in this story, compared with all the myths of pagan religion, is that Jesus' innocence is declared openly rather than concealed: declared by Judas, by Pilate's wife, by Pilate himself, and even by the execution party, which takes some pity on Jesus—they try to be at least a bit decent to him, getting him some help carrying his cross, and sharing their rough soldiers' brew with him when he's thirsty. This is because the Bible begins to reveal the truth about scapegoating. Instead of being the incarnation of evil and entirely deserving a sacrificial death, sacrificial victims emerge in the Bible as innocent. This is what we heard in our psalm today, and in that passage from Isaiah. So, while everyone's against Jesus—the religious leaders, the mob, the soldiers who mock him, even the thieves crucified with him who seize their last chance to be part of a group consensus—yet the chorus of condemnation isn't uniform. Something's changed. The sacrifice is underway, as ever, but it can no longer work as it should. The consensus is starting to unravel. An alternative is presenting itself in this passion text, a God beyond groupthink and cathartic sacrifice.

Notice the way the tables are being turned throughout this passion narrative. The soldiers mock Jesus as king, but it's really the authoritative structure of kingship and the control it represents that's being mocked by Jesus. Likewise, the accusation set over his head on the cross, "This is the King of the Jews", is at the same time both a Roman charge of wrongdoing and a divinely revealed truth—friends, the old order is indeed slipping into darkness. And Jesus himself shows that he rejects the whole system in the way he replies

to Pilate, or doesn't reply. Pilate asks him if he's a king, to locate Jesus one way or another in the familiar world of rivalries that's at stake here. But Jesus refuses to buy into it: "Thou sayest", is all he offers, which is much like saying "whatever". Jesus is telling Pilate that, however he chooses to construe this situation, Jesus couldn't care less—it's nothing to do with him, and with what's important to him.

Then, friends, the darkness comes on symbolically in the narrative. Here, Matthew uses meteorology to point to theology. I suggest that here it's the old sacred, the age-old system, humanity's business as usual, that goes into eclipse. Jesus is now at the deepest point of his immersion in our human world, and in his cry of God-forsakenness he prefigures Nietzsche's madman by 1900 years. A world well under control, and the angry god such a world relies on, are going into eclipse. Jesus dies to usher in a new beginning for the world with God.

And this new world is not slow in revealing itself. The temple curtain is torn in two—the temple that the chief priests were so eager to protect, with all it stood for, by refusing to accept Judas' tainted pieces of silver back into the treasury. What's more, Matthew gives us the extraordinary scene of graves opened and the victims of history returning large as life—a breakout that theologian Jürgen Moltmann called "the resurrection of the disappeared, the murdered and the gassed." And the final word goes to the pagans, who come to see the truth about Jesus—that the one they condemned, mocked and killed, the one who sank into death under the darkness and absence of God, really was God with us. God's declaration at Jesus baptism and his Transfiguration is now echoed on the lips of a pagan Centurion and his death squad: "Truly this was the Son of God". Friends, the times, they are a changin'!

So, despite darkness and God-forsakenness, despite the loss of control and stability that our civilization nostalgically hankers after, despite the failed promises of success and lost hopes of restored fortunes have left so many people feeling adrift and angry, despite much personal loss and cultural confusion, all of which Friedrich Nietzsche lamented, here we encounter a different story, a different reality, a different God. And this week, Monday to Friday, then next Sunday, you and I will be meeting this God in the only place possible: in word and sacrament, in darkness and god-forsakenness.

The Lord be with you ...

Joy or Resentment?

Monday in Holy Week

Year A, 10 April 2017

Isaiah 42: 1-9; Psalm 36: 5-11; Hebrews 9: 11-15; John 12: 1-11

+In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN.

We all know about envy and rivalry, which give birth to bitterness and a poisoned life. We see it in our families, and our workplaces. We see it displayed by the disappointed in our political life. We see it in the inverted snobbery of the poor and the perennial dissatisfaction of the rich. The bottom line is that we feel we lack the being, the mojo, of others and we envy them for that. This often comes out in envying what they have—that car, that promotion, those friends, that gorgeous partner—but in truth it's who they are, not what they have that we envy. And anything that pulls them down, that reduces their apparent advantage and makes us look less shabby, is music to our ears.

We see this attitude in our Gospel today, as the joy of new life and new hope is being celebrated by Jesus and his friends. Beyond the complete loss of everything for Lazarus and his family, Jesus has stepped in to give Lazarus the gift of new life. Jesus restores his “being” as a gift, the being that others crave and strive for while resenting it in others. This lavish reality of gift is highlighted by the expensive perfume that a woman in tonight's Gospel rubs into Jesus' feet, in a gesture that's not only extravagant financially but also frank and extravagant sexually. And don't we see the hackles rise? Judas is the first among the affronted bien-pensants to speak up, spouting responsible stewardship like many Federal treasurers—and parish treasurers—have been doing ever since. John's Gospel tells us that it's because Judas is a thief and hates it when they spend the money that he secretly wants for himself. But I think that affronted self-righteousness, grounded in envy, would account for Judas' disapproval just as well. We're used to people making principled-sounding objections when they're just jealous and resentful.

And it gets worse. The chief priests are apparently envious of the crowd that's drawn to Jesus and to the celebration, that's fascinated at Lazarus back from the dead. So the chief priests plan to put Lazarus to death as well. Talk about turning wine back into water! This envy, this impoverished identity, is so entrenched that any sign of life and joy, any good outcome where someone gets what they don't deserve, is hated and destroyed. This is why Trump and the Tea Party hate Obamacare. This is the spirit that leads to fake news and disinformation, because there can't be anything to celebrate if it's not according to our version of reality. This is the logic of Dr Strangelove, and of whoever it was in the Vietnam era who said that we had to destroy the village in order to liberate it. This is Soviet-era boasting about the glories of a planned economy, while all the supermarkets are empty. This is the line-up of female Chinese Olympic swimmers pumped up on steroids to look like Arnold Schwarzenegger. Here are the angry and aggressive

iconoclasts of every age, despoiling the beautiful and the generous and the insightful with everything from hammers to spray cans to review articles. Friends, all this represents you and me and our world at its typical worst—mean, peevish, hard-done-by.

But against this miserable yet all too familiar calculus—driven by envy, jealous, and hateful of life—the alternative logic of God’s Kingdom declares itself. Here is Isaiah extolling the Lord’s servant, who isn’t pushy or insensitive, who won’t break a bruised reed or quench a burning wick, but whose justice is gentle and restorative, whose desire isn’t to take for himself but to give liberation and freedom, so others can thrive, freed from whichever prison house. Here is God’s unfailing kindness according to the psalmist tonight, who brings out the best for us, who takes us swimming in a river of delights rather than abandoning us high and dry in life. Here is light and mercy from God for you and for me, declared in the face of the proud and the ungodly. Because, ultimately, their way isn’t going to prevail.

Tonight’s epistle from Hebrews is a classic text taking us to the heart of this choice that we have: between joy and resentment, between gift and scarcity, between relief and anxiety. Christ is named in Hebrews as high priest of the good things to come, in the perfect tent, which isn’t made with hands. In other words, this is God’s plan, God’s creation, and not the sort of reality that we make, striving for our own benefit at others expense in lives of envy, rivalry, bitterness, and often violence. This familiar tent is well and truly made with hands, but it’s not where God invites us. Hebrews tells us about this whole disordered, familiar world, made out of violence by sacrifice of the ill-fitting. To be sure, we see this sacrifice later ritualized in animal sacrifice, but this too is ultimately rooted in the targeted violence we use to manage our envy and violence, by sacrificing others.

But, friends, Jesus steps into this human sacrificial machine and reveals its workings. He himself is God’s spanner in the works of human retributive violence. He himself is the giving one who unbalances and overturns a world of greedy, selfish, fearful taking. He himself is the one who ends the mechanism of sacrifice, which secures peace at the expense of blame and bloodletting, by a different order of sacrifice: by a sacrifice that’s about self-donation and free gift rather than a lynching at the behest of self-interest and groupthink. Jesus’ sacrifice is an unmerited offer of life to a world that thinks life has to be secured by taking and killing. It’s about joyful self-consecration, rather than bitter immolation by resentful others.

Friends, this sacrifice of Jesus that Hebrews holds up is not about placating an angry God; it’s not about satisfying an objective standard through an impersonal transaction. But such misguided thinking is resilient; it’s so deeply ingrained in our world of us and them, of diminished selves seeking advantage, of self-righteousness as the best we can achieve because nothing can make us righteous—because, surely, God’s favour can’t come to us unmerited.

This system needs a death to break through it, to bust it open, and get through to us, but not a death according to the rules of this system. Instead, Jesus comes breathing God's love and liberation and freedom in response to our counter-offer of suspicion, demonization, and a punishing death. Only thus can the real God be revealed, outing and undermining the god of the system—revealed as joy in the face of resentment, as gift in the face of scarcity, as self-donation in the face of self-protection; revealed as loose limbed rather than stitched up.

And don't we humans hate all this? Though of course God doesn't hate us, and God shows this in Jesus' willingness to be handed over—so we can do our worst, vent our resentment, and vainly seek our advantage. Eventually, we might just realise that we don't have to do any of this, so we can let go of our resentment. And, friends, that's what we're invited to discover here in the Eucharist: the free gift of worth and identity that we'll otherwise spend our lives trying to earn, to justify, and to seize at someone else's expense.

The Lord be with you ...

The Judgement of this World

Tuesday in Holy Week

Year A, 11 April 2017

Isaiah 49: 1-7; Psalm 71: 1-14; 1 Corinthians 1: 18-31; John 12: 20-36

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

“Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself”

(John 12: 31-32).

Friends, around the world today we’re witnessing a resurgence of the local in protest against the global. Britain turns its back on Europe, and Scotland turns its back on Britain, while Trump’s America turns its back on the world. Everywhere, politicians are struggling to unify societies around a common enemy. Everywhere, modern nation states are losing their significance and trying to claw it back, so everywhere people are building walls, as Wendy Brown points out in her book *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*. Though, the bitter truth is that our enemies are now as much inside as outside, so all this wall building and suspicion of outsiders is really just political theatre. Communities tired of neo-liberalism and its shredding of the social fabric are feeling resentful, and looking for someone to blame.

It’s in light of these trends that I’m struck by Jesus declaring God’s judgement in tonight’s gospel, right at the point when some Greeks arrive at a Jewish Passover festival asking to meet him. Clearly this is a climactic moment for Jesus, initiating the final and most painful phase of his ministry, the cross and passion. Why? And why is this seen as judgement for the world in our gospel? And who or what is this ruler of the world being driven out? Just what is going on here?

The problem addressed by our readings today is how God can make a peaceful and unified world given the self-defining hostilities that we humans prefer—given that the price of our cohesion, our stability, is typically the blaming and scapegoating of someone or some group. The Bible’s answer to this central problem of human history is to acknowledge it, and reveal how God is taking it on, which is first of all through the unique calling of Israel. In our Isaiah reading the subject is Israel, God’s unlikely servant, called to be a light to the nations. Isaiah tells us that it’s too superficial to think that God just cares about Israel and Jacob, because God’s embrace is for the whole human family. Isaiah knows that this calling is so universally unpopular, so contrary to how we humans prefer things, so inimical to our sectional interests, that God’s chosen people will forever be paying a price for their loyalty to God’s universal vision—that in Isaiah’s words, they will be “deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers”, as Israel has so often been down the centuries. But humanity needs such a witness, despite the suffering

it entails—a suffering to which our psalm today so eloquently testifies, while also testifying to the confidence that comes from a sense of being called and chosen by God for this witness.

Because, friends, this unlikely, countercultural project is God's project, to unite humanity in peace rather than shared enmities. Paul talks about God's foolishness in our epistle today, to a world that prefers miraculous proof or else compelling rationality—a world, that is, where "Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom". But for Paul there's a different sign and a different wisdom, which are so at odds with the accustomed signs of human progress, with the accustomed wisdom of human realpolitik, that it all seems like folly. This isn't how the powerful, the prudent, those who know a thing or two about the world, would ever imagine that things could go—which is why Paul says it's only naïve dimwits like you and me who can bear such talk. But thanks to Jesus, thanks to his cross and passion, thanks to his resurrection and through the power of his Spirit, thanks to his Church and his Eucharist, we discover that this isn't ridiculous talk at all. Instead of doing violence to establish unity, God submits to violence in order to reveal and undo this whole mechanism—hence Paul's point that the cross, which seems to the world like foolishness, is actually the power and the wisdom of God.

Our reading from John's Gospel helps us to understand how Paul's radical alternative vision emerges. In our Gospel, the Greeks show up at Passover to see Jesus. What are they going to see? It's time to see God's dream for humanity fully revealed, and their arrival on the scene is a signal. They go through mediators, and their arrival is a bit uneasy—Phillip tells Andrew, then both of them approach Jesus. But Jesus embraces the moment. A new world without these anxious barriers of Jew and Greek is announcing itself, with Jesus prepared to pay the price for its emergence. Of course, he's not happy about facing this hour, but the power of the old order has to be exposed to the light. The ruler of this world has to be cast out, that is, the system has to be broken. If unity is at the expense of the persecuted outsider, Jesus becomes the persecuted outsider himself, unifying everyone against him in order to reveal and undo this unifying mechanism. His lifting up from the earth is what it takes to draw all people together, in unity around him, though no longer in the old way but in a new way: eyes open, self-aware and self-critical, not perpetuating business as usual but exposing and undermining it.

Friends, this is how John's gospel understands judgement: not as punishment but as exposure—as a light shining in the darkness and showing up the system for what it is. Our gospel finishes with Jesus telling his disciples to look carefully at what this light reveals, to learn the lesson and to stay in this light, and to not forget, because the darkness isn't dispelled forever. But, friends, having seen the light in Jesus, having identified the toxic reality that's been cast out, having recognized that what seems foolish is actually powerful and wise, you and I can now go on to become children of light.

Now, let there be no doubt about what being children of light entails in a world bent on making enemies, on casting blame, on shutting out, on avoiding the truth about ourselves.

And let there be no doubt about the price Jesus had to pay to show all this up, to cast the liberating light of God's judgement on our stubbornly-maintained human darkness.

The Lord be with you ...

Beyond Shame

Wednesday in Holy Week

Year A, 12 April 2017

Isaiah 50: 4-9a; Psalm 70; Hebrews 12: 1-3; John 13: 21-32

+In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. AMEN.

“... looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy before him endured the cross, disregarding the shame ...”

(Hebrews 12: 2).

Reflecting on this set of readings that we've heard, what struck me was how they all touch on shame and disgrace. Isaiah talks about the suffering servant of God, who was publicly mocked and beaten but whose faith in God's purposes for him meant that he wasn't put to shame. The psalmist, too, is clearly being persecuted, but his confident prayer is that shame and disgrace will fall on his persecutors, not on him. It's as if he was charged up with grace, sufficient to outweigh any dis-grace. The writer to the Hebrews acknowledges the shame that Jesus faced on the cross, but which he disregarded through his faith in God, into whose place of honour Jesus was very soon received. Hence Jesus' witness in the face of shame can be drawn on by us, emulating him as the pioneer and perfecter of faith, making possible what wouldn't be possible for us otherwise. Then, in John's Gospel, at the climax of Jesus' ministry, a disciple sets out to betray Jesus at the last supper. But this betrayal by Judas becomes an occasion for Jesus to praise God, and to interpret the betrayal as his glorification. The hurt of betrayal becomes the cause of rejoicing for Jesus, and his humiliation becomes his glorification. Friends, if we can understand this, we can understand our God, and ourselves, and our lives a whole lot better, and we can gain a very significant advantage in the harsh business of living.

Now, what is shame? First and foremost, shame is different from guilt. We can feel guilty for a wrong that we've done or a mistake that we've made, but we're not necessarily ashamed. Likewise, we can feel shame for something that isn't necessarily wrong, or properly a matter of guilt. I might feel a pang of guilt for letting someone down, but not ashamed of myself; likewise, I might blush with shame for having turned up late for a dinner, when everyone was well into the main course, even though my host had given me the wrong time. People feel ashamed of being powerless, or incompetent, of having failed, of losing face, or of needing to be cared for, perhaps by being exposed, whether in the hospital, the nursing home, or in front of someone we'd unsuccessfully tried to impress. If we don't look right, talk right, or act right, we can end up ashamed, even if we've done nothing worthy of blame. All of us can recall such cringe-worthy moments when we felt ashamed. And of course, there are times when our guilt is so bad that it turns into shame. Friends, guilt is when we feel we've done wrong, while shame is when

we feel we are wrong—that we’re altogether wrong, rather than just one or another of our actions being wrong.

The context of our readings tonight is of God’s faithful one undergoing persecution, humiliation and, for Jesus, betrayal. The person who’s betrayed can feel so unworthy, so ashamed—suddenly our sense of who we are is overturned; we may have felt popular and successful, but all the while a plot has been underway to defeat and remove us. Lots of politicians know what this feels like—and so Jesus might well have felt, in light of his betrayal by Judas in tonight’s Gospel, where we hear that Jesus was troubled in spirit. Lots of people who’ve been cheated on or abandoned by spouses know a similar feeling of shame, left feeling that they’re just not good enough. And of course, we feel ashamed when someone gets the better of us and makes us look weak, or stupid, and there’s nothing we can do about it. Anger might be the result but shame is at the heart of our response at times like that, hence the all-too-common desire to hit back. In so-called honour societies, shame unleashes violence and scores need to be settled if lost face is to be restored. This spirit isn’t entirely absent even from secular modern societies, where the rule of law is strictly enforced to stop people from settling their own scores.

But this rush to payback isn’t what we see with Jesus, who was willing to undergo the humiliation of the cross, with his bodily functions exposed for all to see, in a death that was terribly shaming—and intentionally so. Yet for Jesus to return from the grave without a vendetta in mind but instead with the incredible words “peace be with you” is a very clear sign that the rules of shame, the experience of shame, the inevitability of shame, and the often-violent consequences of shame, are all out the window. A whole world of shame, of tit-for-tat, of affronted honour and callous payback, of blood-feud and generational conflict, is put on notice.

In Jesus’ case, and for God’s servants met in our Old Testament readings, the counterweight to shame is God’s favour. The balm for human indifference is the fact that God knows us and chooses us and upholds us. This is the message of our baptism, which makes us children of God with a dignity beyond the reach of any shaming words or actions. This is the promise of our Eucharist, and the sacred elements of Jesus’ own body and blood that we receive. These have long strengthened and comforted the defeated, the lost, the ashamed, the condemned, the dying. So, strengthened, Christians have been able to face humiliation, suffering and death, and like Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, even to read such terrible circumstances as a share in his glory.

The theologian James Alison explains the cross in terms of Jesus bearing the ultimate shame that we all fear: of defeat and humiliation, of ultimate betrayal, of worthlessness, so that we no longer fear that place of shame—so that we’re not driven to flee that place, or to retrieve a lost sense of agency and control by perpetuating the age-old stalemate of payback and vendetta. Fr Alison says that Jesus crucified reveals the place of shame to be habitable after all, which is meant to make us Christians really quite fearless.

The Lord be with you ...

Jesus' Alternative Sacrifice

Maundy Thursday

Year A, 13 April 2017

Exodus 12: 1-4, 11-14; Psalm 116: 1-2, 11-18;
1 Corinthians 11: 23-26; John 13: 1-17, 31b-35

+In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy spirit. AMEN.

I want to talk to you tonight about sacrifice: what it is and what it isn't, in light of our readings, and of the Eucharist we celebrate. Paul and John give us two versions of Jesus' sacrifice tonight.

In our Epistle, from Paul, Jesus gives himself; he doesn't point the finger at someone else as the world's problem, who needs to be sacrificed, but he gives himself with his own hand. This is about God taking responsibility. And, what's more, Jesus tells us that this is about remembering, whereas sacrifices are more typically meant to be forgotten once their work is done, aren't they? The bodies are meant to stay buried. Likewise, yesterday's heroes, now discredited, are airbrushed from the photos in the next edition of the history textbooks, as was the case with Trotsky and others in Stalin's Russia. For René Girard, myths are about remembering the pacifying effect of sacrifice, while keeping the truth of sacrifice under wraps. For Jesus, however, if the system requires a sacrifice, he'll be that sacrifice himself. But if the system requires forgetting, he'll insist that we remember.

In John's Gospel, tonight we have another take on Jesus' sacrifice. John's version of the Easter events makes clear that Jesus is sacrificed at the same time as the Passover lambs, so the link with the sacrificial past is made. But, unlike the other Gospels, John doesn't give us the bread and wine of the last supper. Instead he gives us Jesus' sacrifice in a different key, with a remarkable piece of political theatre.

In Jesus' act of foot washing, he upends traditional hierarchies—slaves washed feet, or women, and yet here it's the master and lord who takes the towel. Yet this action means glorification, not humiliation for Jesus, because it reveals what God's like—a God who's for us, a God who'll do what it takes to get through to our hardened hearts. Likewise, and this may come as a surprise, we infer that Jesus also washes the feet of Judas, who is to betray him. There's no payback here, no hatred for Judas, yet Jesus' act is the most profound critique of what Judas is doing. Judas exhibits the imagination of this world, trying to force Jesus' hand and resolve the problems of Israel through conflict with the Romans. But Jesus enacts God's response to human narrow-mindedness, vindictiveness and hurt pride, which is to absorb it like a sponge until there's nothing of it left. Once again, if it's self-justifying violence we want, Jesus submits to that self-justifying violence, while showing us the alternative.

This is the Word of God who came to his own people, according to the prologue of John's Gospel, yet his own people received him not. This is humanity expelling God, whereas we tend to think of God expelling humanity, or of God expelling Jesus. But no, we expel those we blame for humanity's problems, and ultimately we expel God. Instead, Jesus enters into this system to expose and undo it, not to confirm it or to perpetuate it. This isn't how the world is meant to work anymore.

We get a foretaste of this transformation in our Old Testament texts tonight. In our Exodus reading, viewed through the spectacles that René Girard has given us, we can see you how this Passover text points to a changed view of sacrifice.

First, it's lambs not people—just as the sacrifice of Abraham's son is replaced by the sacrifice of a sheep, so here the sacred writer points us away from the old order of human sacrifice. This is reinforced by the sacrifice de-emphasised in favour of simply eating the lambs, with a minimum of ritual—a further shift from the old sacrificial mindset. Next, God declares his judgement on the gods of Egypt—which of course are sacrificial deities, and their day is clearly done. We read that there will be a plague in Egypt and that God will strike down every firstborn child and animal. What stands behind this confronting and perhaps opaque testimony, I suggest, is a social crisis, which is often represented in mythology as a plague—a plague that's typically resolved by animal and maybe human sacrifice, including perhaps sacrificing the firstborn, who are the most precious. So here, I suggest, is a veiled picture of the old sacrificial religion, desperately grinding its way over victims to keep a lid on social disorder—to bring the plague, so called, to an end. As for God striking down the firstborn, this is typical Old Testament talk for saying simply that God allows it to happen, because God allows everything to happen. So, what's presented here as Israel's God taking life in punishment is really the description of an actual pagan outburst of targeted violence aimed at resolving a dire social crisis. Indeed, it's even been suggested that the escape of the Hebrews would have precipitated such a social crisis, just as freeing the slaves created a social crisis in the post-Civil War American South. Instead, God's deliverance of Israel from the plague and from death can be understood as God's call to a different kind of society, a different kind of sacrifice, a different basis for human togetherness, based on God's goodness, not on cathartic blame and condemnation.

This is why our Psalm tonight emphasises a new type of sacrifice, which it calls a sacrifice of thanksgiving. Following Jesus, in this spirit, we Christians thankfully give our lives to God, for the sake of a world that needs to see and learn a different way, and of course it's our responsibility to point that way. This is why Anglican Eucharistic liturgy describes itself as a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, in the words of our psalm, and why at the end, one form of words available to us speaks of our self-offering to God, as a living sacrifice.

For some, the memory of violence attaches to these words, and understandably so, which is why alternative words are provided. But the truest insight here is that God dares to

allow the old sacrificial language, and imagery, while turning it inside out. The self-sacrifice of God, given into our hands, is meant to upset the apple cart of human realpolitik and make a new world order possible—a new world order called Church, a new world order called Eucharist. And our way into this new world order is to join Jesus in his self-offering, in his humble service. That way we pass beyond hurt egos, self-justification, envy, rivalry, violence, payback, lynching and catharsis, until of course the whole thing starts up again. Instead of all this familiar business as usual, we have a new sacrifice, a world-transforming one. Jesus gives himself and we Christians respond Eucharistically, with our own sacrifice of thanksgiving.

The Lord be with you ...

Good Friday: Alone in Berlin

Good Friday, The Liturgy of the Cross, 14 April 2017

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

+In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN.

From our Isaiah reading today:

*“so he shall startle many nations;
Kings shall shut their mouths because of him;
for that which had not been told them they shall see,
and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.
Who has believed what we have heard?
And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?*

(Isaiah 52: 13 – 53: 1)

At the cinema, recently you may have seen a fine film with Brendan Gleeson and Emma Thompson in the leading roles, called *Alone in Berlin*. It's based on the novel by Hans Fallada, but in turn on real events from the early 1940s, about an ordinary German couple's simple but profound act of resistance against the Nazi terror. On Good Friday, when we celebrate God's great act of resistance against humanity's violent, godless business as usual, this film provides an apt illustration of what it is that we celebrate today.

Originally a brother and sister, but a married couple in the film, Otto and Anna Quangel lost their son killed in action, and decided that the Nazi war machine was in fact a great evil. Their protest took the form of placing messages of protest all over Berlin on postcards—in doorways and stairwells, in public places, hundreds of cards, all carefully written to disguise the handwriting. The messages denounced a murderous regime, exposing the lie that Nazism was all for Germany and all for the good. But theirs was a dangerous game, at a time when party spies reported on the residents of apartment buildings, neighbourhoods, and workplaces—like the factory that Otto ran, making ever greater numbers of coffins for dead German soldiers.

The police and the Gestapo were alarmed by this non-violent protest—tyrannous regimes never like the truth being spoken, and their power being mocked, so these offenders had to be caught. What the film doesn't show, but the book does, is just how terrified and conflicted people were to find Otto's cards, in case they were implicated. Because of course everyone becomes complicit in a terror state, at least to some extent, where a generous spirit can get you into trouble.

Eventually, as you might imagine, Otto and Anna were caught, tried, and executed—in their case, to ramp up the terror, they were beheaded. They knew what they were doing, and the risks. I was struck by the way that Otto Quangel faced his accusers and his ordeal with a degree of confident, superior detachment. So it was for Jesus, in John's Gospel today, as the official national religion and the Roman terror state ganged up on him and did their worst. Yet in John's Gospel, Jesus isn't afraid. He interrogates the Roman procurator, not vice versa; he carries his own cross; he brings the faithful forever under the protection of his own mother, and vice versa, in the scene with John and Mary, and, when he's good and ready, he announces "It is finished".

We also see that Pilate recognizes Jesus' innocence and wants to help him. So, too, in the film, Escherich, the Berlin police detective (played by Daniel Brühl), who eventually catches the Quangels, experiences remorse. He waits for Otto on his final lonely walk to the guillotine, and asks almost apologetically if he can do anything for him. Otto looks him in the face and then replies, "give me a card and pen." There's no easy forgiveness here; the enormity of the evil remains and can't be denied, or smoothed over. The only answer is to oppose it and, when overpowered by it, not to give in.

We see Peter giving in in today's Gospel. He just wanted to be one of the crowd. "I'm not Jesus' disciple," he declared. Earlier, in the garden when Jesus was arrested, Peter had already let himself be sucked in by the mob when he struck out with his sword in reciprocal violence, cutting off someone's ear. Instead, Jesus in John's Gospel, just like Otto Quangel from *Alone in Berlin*, lives and dies in a way that doesn't perpetuate violence and in this way, denies the system its victory—a system that never got the better of them. And when someone manages to turn the tables in this way, others notice, and are empowered to do the same.

In the film, Escherich the detective isn't one of these, however. He can't live with what he's done, so he throws hundreds of Otto's cards that had been handed in out the window of his office in Police Headquarters, so people in the square below could pick them up and get the message, then he shoots himself. The suicide of Judas was probably similar, once he'd realized the terrible mistake that he'd made. How much better it would have been if Judas in the Bible and the German policeman Escherich in the film hadn't accepted defeat at the hands of the system, finally acquiescing in self-destruction.

Friends, on Good Friday we see the truth that Pilate can't admit. When he asks his famous question 'What is truth', he shows that he's prepared to assent to anything—that it suits him to fit in, to take refuge in 'alternative facts'. And on Good Friday we see that the mob always prefers someone like Barabbas, who fits into the system. He's the enemy who reveals that we're all friends. We can't do without Barabbas, or his fellow terrorists today, just as we can't really do without those unwelcome asylum seekers, can we, because without them who would we be, we sane and normal and right-thinking people who belong? What we don't want is someone like Jesus, or Otto Quangel for that matter, who shows up the system and who calls it into question. Instead, on Good Friday, we see God's shocking alternative to this way that the world works. We see the lies revealed,

the threats faced and not given in to, the mechanism of blame-shifting and scapegoating exposed, and the underlying logic of death brought to light.

In John's Gospel account of the passion, Jesus resists being overcome by all this. He isn't caught up in the system, as Peter is, along with Pilate, the chief priests, and the Roman soldiers. Otto Quangel does the same. And so can you, so can I, as we enter into Jesus' alternative imagination, ignoring with him the siren song of belonging that so entranced Peter. Because, friends, if we belong to God, we can never be entirely at ease in the world, never comfortably ensconced on the left or the right, or indeed anywhere in the system.

Friends, this is why the servant of Yahweh in our Isaiah reading today, with whose words I began, represents such a startling challenge to the nations, to kings, to the powers that be, to the status quo. This is why our psalmist today begins with the weight of the system crushing him, but ends with a lightness and a freedom born of hope. So too can we face our end, knowing that Jesus has walked this path before us and has come back from the worst our world can offer—thanks be to God, to Easter.

And, friends, this is why St Paul in our 1 Corinthians reading today describes the cross as a scandal to Jews and as foolishness to Gentiles, to Greeks—because the message of the cross isn't sustainable according to typical religious or philosophical standards. It's not the familiar logic of payback, of self-assertion at the expense of others, but nor is it simply about giving up in disgust at the system and disgust at ourselves—as Judas did, and the Berlin detective Escherich, too, ultimately absorbed and defeated by the system. Instead, Jesus took it on, while not giving into it and becoming like it, as Peter did. In this way, Jesus' cross absorbs the evil of the system, pointing beyond its sterile options, resetting human life beyond self-defining conflict. And with the confirmation that comes on Easter Sunday, a new resurrection spirit is unleashed in the world, beyond the power of death, beyond every constraint of the system.

So, the cross is indispensable if we're to understand God, to free our imaginations, to find true human freedom, and to picture genuine social alternatives. The cross is the act that sets us free from sin, on our way to claiming that freedom on Easter Day, at Pentecost, and whenever we celebrate the Christian saints. Friends, the cross is not an Aztec-style sacrifice to preserve the status quo, to pacify an angry God, to restore a deformed world by performing the right ritual, though it certainly does evoke comparisons with all that. Instead, it's the destruction of that stable, comfortable world, and it's God's invitation to do the world in new ways—through the adventure of faith, through the adventure of Church, through the adventure of being a Eucharistic community.

That way, the cross also becomes the pattern of a new kind of human life that we can join in. Beyond looking out for number one, beyond me and mine versus you and yours, beyond leave well alone, beyond everything that St Paul calls the wisdom of this world, God's alternative wisdom revealed by the cross offers us new conditions, a new start, and a new identity. Any other solution would simply have left everything as it was. Otto

Quangel knew this reality, alone in Berlin, yet not alone as he overcome the stifling conformity, the numbing fear of being alone, and the dread of death, which is the fuel on which this whole system runs. Jesus went through all this, and beyond it. So did Otto Quangel—and so can we, you and I.

The Lord be with you ...

The World Begins Again

Easter Vigil

Year A, 6.00am 16 April 2017

Genesis 22: 1-18; Exodus 14: 10-31, 15: 20-21; Isaiah 55: 1-11;
Romans 6: 3-11; Matthew 28: 1-10

+In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Friends, as we gather at the dawn of Easter Day, we don't just celebrate a wonder, a physical miracle, or a proof of God's power, as if that's the only point. More important is the meaning of Easter, what God raising and vindicating the dead Jesus actually means, and how it might affect us. Easter isn't just about what happened in the tomb outside Jerusalem, but about God's new life dawning in the tomb of our human hearts. The Easter Vigil gives us a sustained biblical testimony, in reading after reading, that our world is beginning again, the creation is happening again, and planet Earth has a second chance. So, for we Christians gathered here in the first mass of Easter, it's not just resources or strength for living that we're being given, but a whole new world to imagine and to inhabit—new possibilities, a new future, a new past, a new start. This is why baptism and Eucharist are all about participating in the Easter miracle—indeed, all the sacraments are—because they're about the created order and we ourselves transformed in the glory of the risen Jesus Christ. Let me point out some of these new creation themes in today's readings.

Starting with Genesis 22, we have the aborted sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham, which Jews call the Akkedah. This story can seem like just one more awkward chronicle in a morally problematic Old Testament. What to do with it, and with its violent, changeable God? But if we read this troubling text with René Girard's anthropological eyes, we might see the breakthrough toward which this text actually points. Instead of divine profligacy, might we see here instead a point of transition—a society that's learning to leave behind human sacrifice and replace it with rituals of animal sacrifice?

If we follow the same trajectory still further along, into the Old Testament prophets, we eventually arrive at the condemnation of all ritual sacrifice, in favour of a sacrifice of thanksgiving. Here are the first steps towards a different conception of God and a different function for religion, beyond sacrificial and cathartic violence, pointing towards Jesus' self-sacrifice—not seeking a victim to prop up the system, but instead undoing that system. This aborted sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 looks different if we regard it as an early pointer away from violent and impersonal religion, and away from the social world that such religion supports.

Next, we have another difficult passage in Exodus 14 and 15, with God destroying the Egyptians to liberate Israel. The same Girardian eyes might reveal a different reading of

the death of the Egyptians, in a great social cataclysm. As often in mythology, could this drowning flood instead be a metaphor for the sort of violent social crisis that destroys an ancient civilization? As I suggested with this reading on Thursday night, might this be an image of social collapse brought about by the escape of Hebrew slaves, not unlike social and economic collapse in America's post-Civil War South deprived of its slave labour? We don't have to read this passage and others like it as the atheists do, as yet one more sign of God's appalling violence.

What I particularly notice is the creation imagery of this passage. Where once God's Spirit moved on the face of the deep to create the world, according to Genesis 1, here God's Spirit moves on the waters of the Red Sea to create Israel. In fact, this passage probably came first and the Genesis story about the world's creation came later, making universal this faith in a God who creates his own people from the turmoil of history.

Following on, in Isaiah 55, we have a wonderful and very obvious depiction of God's new creation, as a great feast for God's people beyond the injustice and suffering of history. All the nations are lining up and the wicked are changing their tune, with the creative goodness of God, seen in the blessing of rain and in the bestowing of new life, comes at last to its full flowering.

We go on to the New Testament, to Romans 6, and to baptism, which is yours and my defining participation in the new creation of Easter. Paul talks about Christians as now being free from the power of death, because in a very real sense we've already died, caught up with Christ in his self-offering, through the drowning and the rising of baptism. I take this to mean that in Jesus Christ, you and I are set free through our baptism from having to secure our own life, liberated from the sin that defines our old self with its fears and rivalries and self-justifying anxieties. The dominion of death, the fear of non-being, the obsessive search for lost being at the expense of others, trying to steal it and to hoard it, makes no sense in this new creation. Because now our being, our identity, is given in baptism and Eucharist, and so our life becomes a gift, an adventure, not a burden, not a struggle. Even if our circumstances are difficult and we rightly take all sorts of prudent steps in life, this can now be done under the signs of confidence, thankfulness and boldness, rather than the signs of nervousness, bitterness and cowardice—which are of course the markers of an old order that continues to limp on around us in the world.

And finally, friends, we have our Gospel from Matthew this morning, set on the Sabbath Day, the weekly renewal of creation for Jews. I want to point to three markers of the new creation at work in this story. First, note that the resurrection is imagined as the overpowering of Rome's Empire and the overturning of its laws. The Roman soldiers are struck as if dead, while the new order comes alive. Likewise, the sealed tomb is busted open. This isn't just a feat of strength, it's the breaking of a legal seal. As Walter Wink pointed out, the resurrection is against the law! A whole world order is being put on notice and tipped over.

Second, notice the first words out of the Angel's mouth, 'do not be afraid', which Jesus repeats. This isn't a ghost story, which James Alison points out is always really a revenge story. Rather, this is a new story for a new world, beyond the rules that ran the old world. Slain victims don't come back offering peace and a new beginning, but that's what happens in the resurrection of Jesus, so that all bets are now off.

Third, we realize that in a Jewish culture where women couldn't be legal witnesses, the two Marys are commissioned by the risen Jesus to be his witnesses, telling his male disciples the story and having them meet Jesus in the mission field, in Galilee. Here's another sign that something new is afoot, a new way of doing the world, in which a divine miracle echoes throughout culture and history, changing the way men and women can do business in the world ever after.

Friends, in all these readings, in all these examples, what emerges is a new way of understanding ourselves and our lives, a new beginning from God for the adventure of human living, a new creation no less. You and I are initiated into this new creation through our baptism, to participate in the risen life of Jesus through the Eucharist. So, for us today the miracle of Easter brings a different life, a Christian life, an Easter life.

The Lord be with you ...

The Resurrection Includes Us

Easter Day

Year A, 16 April 2017

Acts 10: 34-43; Hymn to the Risen Christ; Colossians 3: 1-4; Matthew 28: 1-10

+In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN.

“Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God”

(Colossians 3: 3).

Friends, this is a very strong statement, and nothing I encountered in the nominal Anglican home of my childhood would have helped me to comprehend it. This powerful declaration from Colossians today actually explains the meaning and content of my baptism as an infant, though of course that event would have been understood as a social obligation in accord with bourgeois respectability rather than a radical rebirth to a new identity and a new agenda for living. Indeed, the very idea that there was anything wrong with us, and with our suburban life and its standard priorities—such that our minds had to be lifted up and out of that world, such that in some sense we had to die to that world—would have made no sense at all.

This was a world, after all, where respectable Protestant householders and taxpayers didn't have to worry about things like sin, which was something that nice people weren't involved in. As for setting our minds on things above, that could only mean a look of pious composure, to accompany appearances in our Sunday best. The notion of being trapped in sin, of being addicted to a proud self-sufficiency, wouldn't have been an explicable let alone an acceptable diagnosis, according to the wisdom of that world—a world in which there wasn't much genuine openness to others, in which God marked the remote edges of life but did not occupy its centre, in which Jesus was never named, in which the word 'God' was an optional addition in commending a safe, prudential morality.

But, friends, that's not the world of Easter, it's not the point of our Eucharist today, it's not the logic of our readings, and it's not the meaning of our Christian lives. The temperature is higher today, the mood far more expectant, the joy not quite containable, and if it isn't, then I don't quite know what we think we're doing here today. Does Easter just mean that every cloud has a silver lining, or that there's a heaven for all good children beyond the bright blue sky? Or does the eruption of Jesus Christ from the throttling of death and defeat to remake the world in the power of his resurrection actually burst the bounds of flat, conventional, self-regarding semi-Christian morality and threaten instead to blow our minds, to set them on something above—above business as usual, above predictable piety?

Friends, in our readings today the resurrection reaches out to grasp us and transform us. It happened 2000 years ago and it happens this morning. The resurrection involves us—our hearts, our imaginations, our minds, our changed lives—and is given liturgical expression in the Eucharist. We see it in all our readings this morning.

In Acts today, we see minds lifted up to a new way of doing the world. Jews and gentiles together find themselves drawn into a new experience of forgiveness, of energy unleashed, of mission embraced, of a world transformed in light of the risen Christ. Friends, what a contrast with many parts of our Church, where the very thought of mission and evangelism seems worse than a trip to the dentist. But here's the reality of Easter: people swept up with Christ into a new agenda, a new adventure, a new *raison d'être*.

This is an image that we also hear in the Easter Anthem this morning, the hymn to the risen Christ: the Church is invited to see itself as dead to sin, but alive to God in Jesus Christ. All the things that we do and don't do as individuals, families, and as a Church, things that diminish and damage ourselves, others and the world, are put on notice today. We don't have to sigh reluctantly about our powerlessness in the face of them, or put them out of our minds. Instead, we can consider ourselves dead to all that, as part of Jesus Christ—not perfect, to be sure, but not condemned to stubborn and toxic imperfection either. This is the imagery of baptism: we die with Adam, drowned in the font, then we rise with Christ, swimming in his new life like dolphins, rejoicing in our freedom.

This is the life that Colossians imagines for us today: looking to where Christ now sits at the right hand of God, in the place of honour. In my upbringing, no one talked about Jesus and, if asked, probably wouldn't know what to say, except perhaps that he expects children to be nice. Yet beyond the role of teacher, or as some vague pointer to prudential wisdom, Colossians today imagines Jesus at the heart of who God is and what God means. Looking to Jesus lifted up in glory isn't to condemn the non-Christian religions to ignominy, or to become religious weirdos ourselves, but to become like Jesus. And if the Church becomes more like Jesus, and we ourselves, then the world has nothing to fear, then progressive agendas have nothing to fear, then honest searchers after God in whatever religious tradition have nothing to fear, and nor do honest atheists have anything to fear, because Jesus as God for us means that we are for the world, for the cause of life and liberty, for the sharing of joy and the sharing of God, with no hatred or superiority.

Finally, in our Gospel today, which was also read for the Easter Vigil at dawn this morning, we again see that resurrection is a collective reality. Its centre is Jesus' dead body and the events of 2000 years ago, but its circumference includes our world today, our selves, and our future. Nobody in the New Testament simply observes the risen Jesus and remains unmoved. Here in the Gospel the sight of Jesus evokes the worship of the women, and sends them out on a mission from God, to begin proclaiming the risen Jesus Christ.

Friends, this mission is also something we have a part in—we who're baptised, who share in the Eucharist, and who have a sense of being caught up in all this. Though I'm sure that not everyone has that sense here today. I say this not as a criticism, but to highlight a possibility, and to issue an invitation. Many yearn to be part of something bigger than themselves, and may have tried various options, hopefully with some success, though success isn't always the outcome. But here, friends, we're encountering something bigger than ourselves that can transform and resituate our lives, beyond prudential wisdom, beyond lukewarm or half-digested faith, beyond it all being a big unfathomable mystery, and perhaps beyond all the dead ends that we keep running into.

I conclude with a warning, that Easter isn't a happy pill. Jesus offers us no escape from having to live in the real world. But beyond the imaginative hold that death exerts, beyond the widespread agenda of self-preservation, likewise beyond the corresponding turn to recklessness and risk that helps others shake themselves free from the fear of death, and beyond the widespread agenda of getting what we can in a competitive game of life, there is an alternative. Instead, we can set our minds on things above, where Christ is, where our baptism has placed us, and where our Eucharist perpetually redirects us.

I hope that if your heart is so moved today you can rejoice in this Easter Eucharist, and then perhaps seek out the parish clergy in the week ahead, to begin exploring what God might have in store for you. And whatever that might be, you can be sure it won't be dull, respectable, half-hearted Christianity. It will be edgier, more engrossing, more frustrating, and a ton more fun than that.

The Lord be with you ...