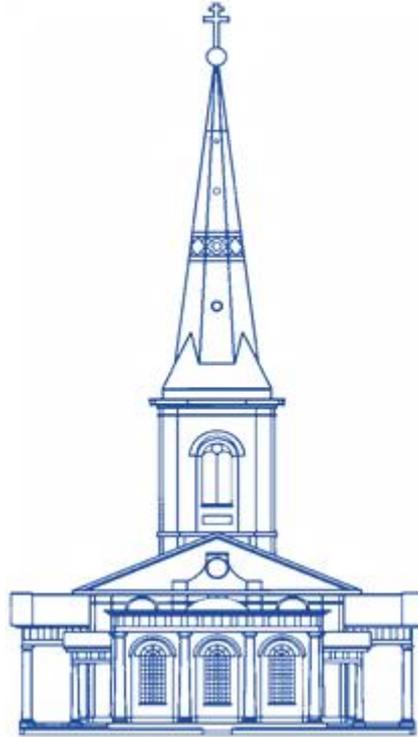


ST JAMES' CHURCH, KING STREET,
SYDNEY, NSW



**HOLY WEEK AND
EASTER SERMONS
2018**

BY THE REVEREND CANON DR EMMA PERCY
CHAPLAIN, TRINITY COLLEGE, OXFORD

THE REVEREND CANON DR EMMA PERCY

Emma Percy was educated at Cambridge and Durham Universities with degrees in History and Theology. At Durham she completed her ordination training and was ordained as a deacon in 1990, serving her title at St Andrew's Bedford in St Albans diocese. Whilst in Durham she met and married her husband Martyn who is also ordained. In 1994, she was one of the first group of women ordained as priests in the Church of England. From 1994-97, she established a student Chaplaincy at Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge. At the end of 1997, she became the Vicar of Holy Trinity Church, Millhouses in the diocese of Sheffield. For the last 12 years she has been chaplain of Trinity college, and for the last 8 years has combined that with being the college's Welfare Dean.



During her time at Trinity, Emma studied part-time at the University of Nottingham, completing her PhD in 2012. This has subsequently been published as *Mothering as a Metaphor for Ministry* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014). This work also informed her book *What Clergy Do Especially when it looks like nothing*. (SPCK 2014). She has also authored a number of book chapters and journal articles. She is a regular keynote speaker for diocesan conferences and clergy training days. She has also led a number of retreats reflecting on the concept of 'Being Good Enough', which she hopes will lead to a book on discipleship in due course.

As part of the first group of women to be ordained priest, she has had a continuing interest in questions of gender justice and inclusivity within the Church. She is currently the Chair of WATCH (Women and the Church) and sits on a number of national committees that relate to the continuing complex tensions around the ministry of women in the church.

She and Martyn have two sons who are now in their early 20s and semi-independent. Martyn is the Dean of Christ Church, so they get to live in a wonderful historic home in the heart of one of Oxford's grandest colleges. Emma is an Honorary Chaplain at the Cathedral, which means she assists at some of the services, and her work in the wider church was recognised by the Bishop with the conferring of an Honorary Canonry in 2016. Central to home life are the dogs, the elderly Bearded Collie, Pippa, and the new and overly enthusiastic German Short-haired Pointer, Lyra. Walking the dogs and practising yoga are Emma's ways of trying to maintain a balanced life. Reading novels and detective stories are her ways of escaping from the pressures of pastoral ministry.

‘Making an Entrance’

Palm Sunday
(25 March 2018)

Isaiah 50: 4-9a, Psalm 31: 9-18; Philippians 2: 5-11, Mark 15: 1-39.

I have been to Jerusalem twice. Firstly about 6 years ago on an organised pilgrimage and more recently, 3 years ago with my younger son when he was 19 years old. This latter time, without the wonderful tour guide and air-conditioned coach I was more aware of the tensions of this incredible city. On a lovely warm winter morning, we strolled down from the mount of olives drinking in the history and the spirituality, gazing across to the old city, and it felt such a peaceful place. On entering the old city, we suddenly felt a change in atmosphere. We realised that as we walked through the hustle and bustle of the Arab quarter, we were walking close to an orthodox Jewish woman and her children, flanked by armed security. The air felt tense, the security men were constantly looking around and I wanted us to turn up the next possible street to take us away from this situation. My instinct was to keep my distance and to get away from anything potentially confrontational. After all it is not my conflict.

We had arrived a few days earlier, and our taxi route to the Anglican Cathedral of St George’s where we were staying, was made complex due to a shooting at the Damascus Gate of the old city. Our friend David, chaplain to the Archbishop, had to explain to his young children that the bangs were not fireworks but guns, and you did not try to get close, but made sure you kept your distance. He had been there for about 6 months and was well aware of the stresses of bringing up young children in this glorious but volatile place.

On another day Joe ensured that we experienced the checkpoint in the security wall alongside local Arabs, returning from Ramallah. The bored young soldiers clearly felt it mildly amusing to shut the gates once Joe had gone through, leaving me for about 3-4 minutes on the wrong side; I felt powerless, and although my head said that I was safe, emotionally I was scared and uncertain, cursing Joe for putting me in such a frightening place. We were very aware that this was a city where violence and a fear of violence were ever present just below the surface, ready to erupt when individuals or groups crossed the line.

I say all this by way of introduction to some thoughts on Palm Sunday, as we mark Jesus’ arrival in the city. We know that the Jerusalem that Jesus knew was also a place of political complexity. The occupying Roman soldiers would have been visible in the streets. There were various groups whose resistance to the Romans might spill over into violence. Festival time, when the Jews from all over the region converged on Jerusalem, was a time when tensions might rise, when different agendas might surface, when unrest and attempts at revolution might happen.

It is for this reason that Jesus' friends had suggested he should stay away from the city. It was not a safe place for him. He was someone who attracted crowds, and crowds of ordinary people. Crowds were seen as potentially problematic by those whose job it was to keep order. Jesus had put himself outside the boundaries of the religious authorities, and in doing so he threatened the pragmatic compromises between the religious leaders and the Roman rulers. These compromises allowed the Jews to celebrate the religious festivals. For Jesus to come into this tense city at this time would be provocative on many levels.

The Bible verse that has been in my mind as I have prepared for this Holy Week is:

'For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.'

(1 Corinthians 1: 18, 25)

The worldly wisdom would advise Jesus to keep a low profile, think carefully about how to take the temperature down, to reassure the authorities that he was no threat. That would have been the sensible thing to do.

Instead he behaves foolishly, making an entrance, and it is an entrance particularly directed at the religious authorities, heavy in sign language.

This entrance is staged; the disciples have fetched the appropriate beast. He rides in on a donkey or a colt, he gets his followers to begin to cut down palm branches and begin the proclamation of him as the son of David, and before long crowds have joined in. His entry into the city is highly visible, eye-catching, and noisy.

This entry was deliberately staged to reference the prophecy of Zechariah 9: 9-10:

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your king is coming to you;
righteous and having salvation is he,
humble and mounted on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the war horse from Jerusalem;
and the battle bow shall be cut off,
and he shall speak peace to the nations;
his rule shall be from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.*

In highly symbolic style Jesus was declaring himself the Successor to David, the promised King, who will come to bring peace, and those in the crowd recognised the

symbolism. “Hosanna to the Son of David, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord”, they cried.

The synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us that Jesus went directly to the Temple and began to overturn the money tables, creating havoc and proclaiming the prophetic words from Jeremiah.

Jesus caused a scene, provoking attention, not politely challenging but noisily protesting.

Jesus through actions proclaimed himself the heir to the great King David, the heir to the prophets, the embodiment of God’s promises of hope and fulfilment.

There was nothing of the quiet rational questioning of the status quo, instead this is the foolishness of grand provocative gestures that unsettled both the religious and political authorities – what might happen next and how can this be controlled? Jesus Made An Entrance.

So, what are we to make of this? What has Palm Sunday got to say to us?

Yearly we remember the events as we prepare for Holy Week, knowing that this entrance is the prelude to the arrest, botched trial and crucifixion of Jesus.

The events remind us, at the outset of Holy Week, of the courage displayed by Jesus, of the integrity and the openness. He does not hide, he does not compromise the message, toning it down to make it less confrontational. He understands the risks and turns his face to Jerusalem to make an entrance.

These events remind us that there are times when things need to be out in the open, when grand gestures are appropriate, when popular protest may be the right way to proclaim the truth. When we have to face up to difficult situations, with courage and confidence.

Hopefully none of us here will be called to walk with confidence into situations which might cost us our lives but, down the ages, Christians have done just that, refusing to compromise where they feel that would be to deny the faith, choosing not to hide when a visible stance might encourage and free others. Some of these people have become the martyrs of the faith.

One thinks of the recent decision by the Roman Catholic church to canonise Oscar Romero who spoke up for the needs of his people, becoming in the troubled politics of El Salvador in the late 1970s the voice of courage and a campaigner for peace through just means. Knowing that he was under threat, he did not hide, and was assassinated as he said mass at the altar, 38 years ago yesterday. He and others followed the way of Christ, committed to God’s eternal kingdom not to his own survival.

In our safer lives, we can still ask how and when we might be called on to be visible as people of faith and integrity. When is it right for us to use the language of symbolic gestures to witness to the truths of God? When should our voices be heard speaking the truths others find it hard to express?

So often Christianity is a polite religion, especially if we are Anglican, and that is mostly right and proper but, Palm Sunday reminds us that it is not always so. Sometimes we need to make a noise, to attract the crowds and proclaim God's kingdom, even though others might wish us to keep quiet. Putting our head above the parapet is exposing, yet if God is with us we can trust that we will not be alone.

So, as we remember Jesus 'Making An Entrance', we pray for the discernment to know when we should be outspoken for our faith and the values of God's kingdom. That we may find the courage to then be so.

The wisdom of the world says don't make a fuss, don't make an exhibition of yourself. The foolishness of God calls us to speak up for the values of the kingdom, even if that means making a noise.

‘There were also women ...’

Monday in Holy Week

(26 March 2018)

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

One of my favourite verses in the gospels, in fact it is only half a verse and it comes at different points in all of the synoptic Gospels, is ‘*There were also women ...*’ (Luke 8:2, Mark 15:40).

This reminds us that the community around Jesus, those he shared his ministry with, was a mixed community of men and women. This often seems to be forgotten. We picture Jesus with his male disciples and occasional walk-on parts for women. Yet, the gospels tell us that the women disciples who came down from Galilee with Jesus were integral to the group, providing for Jesus out of their own resources.

We even know some of their names, Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James, Joanna, Salome, Susanna. As well as these Galilean women, we know the names of the sisters whose home at Bethany appears to have been a refuge for Jesus and his friends – Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus. Jesus appears to have taken women seriously.

We read about Martha and Mary a number of times, first in Luke’s gospel, where we find Mary defying the conventions of her day and joining the men sitting at the feet of Jesus, learning from him. Martha is put out and wants Mary to be corrected and sent back to help her, but Jesus affirms Mary’s choice.

We meet them again earlier in John’s gospel mourning the death of their brother. On this occasion, it is Martha who finds the courage. She comes out to meet Jesus, and as they converse, she proclaims him as the Messiah, the one in whom the hope of the resurrection rests. A great statement of faith paralleling that of Peter. Both sisters witness the restoration of their brother to life.

In today’s reading we find a picture of intimacy in which Mary performs a seemingly pointless extravagant gesture. She takes the pot of expensive oil and pours it over Jesus’ feet, wiping them with her hair. Judas is there to point out the sensible action she should have taken. With a level of piety, he suggests that she should have sold it and given the money to the poor. Jesus affirms Mary’s foolish and wasteful act; recognising that depth of meaning.

Now the gospels give us three different stories of Jesus being anointed. What they all have in common is that it is a woman who does the anointing. What they also all have in common is that, contrary to popular thinking and much art and film depictions, none of these women is Mary Magdalene.

Are they simply different versions of the same event? Or did it happen more than once? I increasingly think that these were different but similar events, maybe even echoing each other. It certainly helps to look at the different accounts and, whether we conclude they are the same but told differently, or different events, they help us to understand a number of different truths about Jesus.

Matthew and Mark tell a similar account of an unnamed woman who simply appears and pours perfumed oil over Jesus' head. This act echoes the role of the prophet in anointing the next king. Think about Samuel going out to look at the sons of Jesse, and on seeing David, pouring the oil on as a mark of his prospective Kingship. It also echoes the anointing of the Old Testament priests, the oil poured onto the head of Aaron and his sons, consecrating them as priests. In this encounter, it is a woman who is the prophet, publicly proclaiming the truth of Jesus as the anointed, the King of God's kingdom. A woman who anoints Jesus, consecrating him as a priest. A woman who marks him as the Anointed One, the Messiah, the Christ.

Luke's story is more complex and interestingly is the one best known, perhaps because the unnamed woman in this account is a woman of ill repute – she is a sinner. In fact, the story is about hospitality and welcome. Simon the Pharisee has invited Jesus in to a meal, but he has stinted on that welcome. He is the religiously upright man and is contrasted with the religiously unclean woman. This is about worldly values; who is the one who is respectable, and shouldn't we see that person as the one to listen to?

Yet, it is the woman who generously serves Jesus, pouring perfumed oil on his feet alongside her tears and wiping them clean with her hair. It is a disturbingly erotic image, but Jesus, instead of being embarrassed, honours her generosity, contrasting it with the meanness of the welcome he has received from the religiously righteous man. It is a story about receiving forgiveness and where the genuinely righteous one is to be found.

John's account, which we have just heard, shows Mary of Bethany enacting a similar gesture. There is no contrast here between the righteous and the sinner. This is not a public act but an act between friends, but it is again a prophetic act. It is Mary recognising at some level the likelihood of Jesus' death, anointing his body for the tomb. She is unmoved by Judas' taunts of extravagant foolishness.

Somehow, she has recognised something of who Jesus is and what might be about to happen. The atmosphere is tense in the world outside their home, but here she offers a faithful gesture of commitment and a prophetic gesture of what is to come.

Later in the week, Jesus will, like the sinful woman in Simon's house and Mary of Bethany in her own home, kneel down and handle the feet of others, washing them with water and drying them with a towel, no doubt remembering the feel of the rich oil, soft hair and hands of the women on his own feet.

So, on this Monday we remember the women whom Jesus took seriously. The women whom God inspired to act prophetically, the women who understood something of the truths about Jesus and found ways of bearing witness to that.

Dorothy L Sayers, at a talk on Women's Equality in the 1930s wrote this:

Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man - there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronised; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as "The women, God help us!" or "The ladies, God bless them!"; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unself-conscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything "funny" about woman's nature.

(Dorothy L. Sayers, 'Are Women Human?'
Astute and Witty Essays on the Role of Women in Society)

Jesus recognised that women could be revelations of God, they could listen and learn, they could be prophetic, they could teach a lesson to the righteous, if only the righteous would have the capacity to listen. Yet – though Matthew and Mark say that the anointing woman will be remembered – her name has not been. And down the ages the sinfulness of the Lukan woman has been stressed over her prophetic witness.

So, we ask today – Where do our prejudices stop us from seeing and hearing the truths of God in those we overlook or marginalise? Does our sense of righteousness limit our capacity to act generously to God and to others?

The wisdom of the world is clear about status; those who are considered wise. The foolishness of God speaks through the lives and actions of many whom the world considers insignificant, especially through those who have the capacity to show love and compassion to others.

‘Falling’

Tuesday in Holy Week

(27 March 2018)

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

The wisdom of the world tells us we should always be in control, the foolishness of God tells us that sometimes we will fall.

I don't know if any of you, like me, sometimes have dreams in which you are falling. That sense of trying to hold the next rung on the ladder, and somehow it disappears, comes away in your hands, and you wake up with a start. Dreams like this can come when I am feeling overwhelmed and stressed with issues that I am finding hard to manage. When things beyond my control impact heavily on my day to day life and I am struggling to find the right way of coping. My subconscious clearly reads this as falling, a loss of control, and a sense of powerlessness spills over into my dreams.

There is a sense of loss of control in the events of Holy Week. Somehow, at some point, Jesus seems to simply let events take their course. There is no longer any hiding from the authorities, there is no resistance to the soldiers, no defence to the accusations. For his friends, this must have been deeply confusing and immensely frightening.

Why was he not capitalising on the grand entrance of Palm Sunday, why was this wonderful crowd pleaser, brilliant preacher, holy man of God not wowing the crowds, out-speaking his accusers, drawing on his supporters to take control of the situation?

And where was God? Where was the God Jesus spoke to with such intimacy, proclaimed with such authority, and pointed to as the life-giver? If Jesus was the Messiah, then why was God not smiting the enemies and restoring the fortunes of Israel through the anointed one.

The powers and principalities appeared to be closing in, and Jesus seemed to let go, to free fall into the arrest, trial, and the finality of the crucifixion. And his friends find themselves caught in their own nightmares of fear, doubt and a level of deep despair – there was nothing they could do, it was all falling apart.

In terms of the wisdom of the world it was all disastrous. The project of Jesus' ministry that his disciples and companions had invested their lives in appeared to be failing. Everything they had dreamt of was in free fall.

Yet, in the words Jesus has shared with them there are pointers to a different wisdom. In the foolishness of God's created order a grain of wheat needs to fall to the ground and

appear to die. And yet it is through this process that life, fruit, food for all comes into being.

Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground, it remains a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit. The seed falls as if discarded, as if it is of no importance, and yet from the place where it falls, new life springs up that provides fruit to feed people. In fact, the seed has become the new fruit, new life springing from the seed.

Jesus is a man discarded, counted as expendable by the peace-keeping coalition of the state and religious authorities. He is to be removed. Yet, his falling, foolish and wasteful in the eyes of the world, will in fact be in God's wisdom the precursor to life in all its fullness.

We get glimpses of the fully human nature of Jesus struggling with this surrender to the chaos: "Father save me from this hour," he prays. Later we will remember him in the garden praying that it might be different, that the cup might pass. Part of him is hoping that there may be another way, some re-grasping of control, a way out, as in all the good stories, when we find the last minute reprieve, the heroic action that saves the day.

Yet, in God's wisdom this falling is necessary, and Jesus can endure it because even in the midst of the chaos, there is a deep trust in the one who loves him. The light is fading and yet that does not mean that the darkness has overcome.

So, what does all of this mean for us as we gather this Holy Week?

Most of us live in a culture that places immense emphasis on being in control, we struggle when we feel that things are spiralling out of control. We live with myths that seem to hold us responsible, or teach us to look for people to blame, when the chaos sets in. Yet even the most organised of us have to contend with the things beyond us, the randomness of the suffering of our world. The diseases that debilitate, disable, and disrupt our own carefully ordered lives or that of our loved ones. The consequences of our own behaviour and the behaviour of others can destabilise and derail our well-meant plans. Our careful driving is no protection against the recklessness of the one traveling towards us.

We want to be in control and to know where we are going, what is happening. To fall implies a letting go of this. To fall is to fail; our downfall is our worst moment, is it not? Cities fall; as do people. It is to be reduced: to come to nothing.

And yet, we also know that to fall, to let go may be about an opening up. People pay money to fall, to bungee jump, free fall out of an aeroplane, loving the sensation of being unencumbered. We also speak of falling in love, that powerful overwhelming sense of allowing our life to become full of another.

To fall is to let go. To be vulnerable. To accept that some things are beyond our control, both good and bad. To fall is to go with the flow; to cascade, like a river or waterfall.

Jesus seems to allow himself to fall down the waterfall, be blown in the wind, tossed between those who fear him, discarded as a problem to be done away with – and he is lifted up on the cross – for those living through the experience it makes no sense, it seems to be about failure. It seems hopeless. Jesus becomes the discarded one, and it is not surprising that Christians came to associate him with the servant described in Isaiah: ‘a man of suffering, despised and held of no account’. And yet, Jesus tells us things are not necessarily as they seem. There is a different perspective, deeper truths, and richer wisdom. The discarded seed will bear fruit, the letting go of control over one’s life will not lead to failure but to new freedoms, the despised will become the one to whom all look for hope, the dead will be raised up, and the crucifixion will be followed by resurrection. This is a falling into life.

Jesus could endure all of this because despite everything he trusted in the love of God.

We are called to be people of faith, but that does not mean that the road will be easy. Prayer is not like a slot machine. There is no guarantee that if we do it right we get what we wanted. There will be times when, like the disciples, we can only see chaos. When God seems powerless, when our hopes are dashed, and what we feared comes to be. Times when we feel that God has dropped us.

We need in these times to look around at the world God has made; full of life. Where what is dead becomes the seed for what will be, where the barren months of winter begin to show the fresh shoots of spring, and then we need to trust, often at the times we feel least like trusting, in the God who made this world, in the God who loves us and those we love. We may not understand the times of darkness, when all seems to be loss. We may not know how long we will have to walk through the wilderness, yet Jesus points us to the hope that will be fulfilled and the love that will not fail us.

The wisdom of the world tells us to take control, and the foolishness of God tells us that when we fall we will be caught. As Dame Julian tells us, in the end, ‘all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.’

Rilke’s *Book of Hours*, 1905

*How surely gravity’s law,
strong as an ocean current,
takes hold of the smallest thing
and pulls it toward the heart of the world.*

*Each thing - each stone, blossom, child -
is held in place.*

Only we, in our arrogance,

*push out beyond what we each belong to
for some empty freedom.*

*If we surrendered
to earth's intelligence
we could rise up rooted, like trees.
Instead we entangle ourselves
in knots of our own making
and struggle, lonely and confused.*

*So like children, we begin again
to learn from the things,
because they are in God's heart;
they have never left him.*

*This is what the things can teach us:
to fall,
patiently to trust our heaviness.
Even a bird has to do that
before he can fly.*

‘Friends – trust and betrayal’

Wednesday in Holy Week

(28 March 2018)

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

The wisdom of the world praises the independent autonomous man, to be able to stand alone is to be strong. The foolishness of God values the complexity of relationships, within God, between God and humanity, and in the gift of human creativity.

One of the key things we learn about the person of Jesus in the gospels is that he had friends and companions. We mostly see him with others. There were sometimes crowds and at other times needy individuals that called out in the street; he had compassion on these strangers, with miracles and conversations he changed lives.

We also know that he had friendships that were deeply held, those with whom he shared his travelling, his meals, his down time. He has friends whom he trusts enough to curl up in their boat and fall asleep. We are told that he relies on his friends. The women of Galilee who are counted amongst his close companions looked after him out of their own resources according to Luke’s gospel. He is shown in today’s reading reclining alongside the disciple he loved. He was a man people knew and trusted. We know that he wept at the death of Lazarus his friend, and found a home from home at the house Lazarus shared with his sisters. We have a sense of deep companionship.

Yet, in Holy Week, we also see some of the limits of human relationships. We find the inability of his companions to understand what he is trying to say, the failure of his close friends to keep awake in the garden and share in Jesus’ deep pain. We know of Peter’s fear and denial of the friendship in the courtyard – “I do not know this man!” And we also know of Judas, trusted companion, the one who shared bread with Jesus; who sold him to the authorities.

Human relationships bring out the best in us. When we are loved by another we flourish. When we know the pleasure of a good friend who shares our outlook and laughs at our jokes, we grow in confidence. When we are drawn out of our own preoccupations by the needs of one we love, finding ourselves utterly able to compassionately be there for them, we surprise ourselves with our capacity to care. This is part of God’s creative vision for humanity. For us to be in relationships that enhance us, enrich us, enable us to be more ourselves, capable of reflecting that compassionate love of God. Others enable us to move away from selfishness towards companionship and collaborative ways of being in the world.

Yet, the wisdom of the world often speaks against this. We are encouraged to see independence as the goal of maturity, to see dependence on others as weakness. Richard

Dawkin's famous book, *The Selfish Gene*, suggests that this is how we are made. In our fight to survive it is each for himself.

Mary Midgely's book, *The Solitary Self*, critiques Dawkin and others, for their misreading of Darwin. Darwin's concept of the survival of the fittest was not about some knock-out competition, she says, but about the survival of those most fit for their environment. That often means those species who collaborate with each other and with other species, in complex ecosystems of interrelation.

Selfishness is not part of the human DNA, we were made to be with others. We are born into relationship, we begin our life as part of another, cradled in her womb, and we come out into a world where the quality of the relationships that surround us are crucial in our development. An abandoned child will die; an unloved child will carry emotional damage.

As we mature, we learn that it is not independence that we need, but as one writer puts it, more and more complex relationships of interdependence; relationships of mutuality, of give and take. However, we also know that to love another, to trust another, to form relationships lays us open to hurt. The political philosopher, Hannah Arendt, talks about our capacity to trespass on each other. Because we are each unique, we misread, we misunderstand, we fail to be there or we overreach, step on the other's feelings, encroach in their space.

Human sinfulness means we need to acknowledge our jealousies, our inability to see things from the other's point of view, our times of self-absorption, our greed, our laziness, our fears and fantasies. We make friends, we create relationships of love, we trust others, and yet we also let them down.

And we find this in Holy Week. The gospels simply give us snapshots and leave so much unsaid. Peter's fear for his life leads him to deny his friend, and we wonder what would I do? We can understand the calculation in his mind; what good will it do Jesus if I say yes and am arrested too? We hear little of the other male companions who are in hiding, confused and uncertain what to do.

It is, thank goodness, unlikely that any of us will have been put in such a fearful place, but in little ways we may well have failed to defend a friend from the gossip or critiques of others, re-narrated our lives to fit in better with the world we want to be in. We have justified such behaviour as minimal, not harmful. We have distanced ourselves from the difficulties, protected ourselves from the mess and the muddle others are in. We too have fallen short.

Judas, on the other hand, is more complex, and centuries of vilification surround his actions. For Dante he belongs in the very heart of hell. What turned Judas we wonder? At what point did his sense of friendship fail? What did he hope to achieve?

There is something disturbing in John's narrative. Did Jesus set Judas up? Was his action necessary to set things in train? And yet, the kiss in the garden seems to be such a poignant sign of human betrayal.

We know that whatever happened to make Judas act in the way he did, it did not fulfil him. He becomes a man of utter despair, taking his own life. Was he in turn betrayed by the authorities? Had he thought that there would be a different outcome? Did he feel betrayed by Jesus, had he expected a spectacular miracle that would change everything?

We know that when politics get involved things get messy. We have seen some of the most horrendous human crimes against others in the name of politics, of defending one's own, of revolutionary zeal. We know that individuals can be turned into betrayers of neighbours by those who convince them that this is their duty. Some kid themselves that it will not end in disaster for those they betray. They do not allow themselves to think through the consequences, after all they do not pull the trigger, switch on the gas, pull out the machete, bang in the nails.

From the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis to the world we live in today the human desire to pass the blame is seen. It was not me it was her, not me the snake.

In England, we are just beginning the IICSA process which you have already been through. I read the accounts of basically good people, senior clergy, who say, it was not my responsibility, it was someone else's job to do the checks, to follow up the concerns and I just never believed that he could do that. It can be hard to accept the responsibility for our failures of care.

In Arendt's writing about human relationships she suggests that we need two things, the ability to make and keep promises; that is to be trustworthy people of integrity as far as is possible. Then, because we do trespass, we need the capacity to forgive and be forgiven. She suggests that we look to Jesus of Nazareth to help us with this.

Jesus on the cross does not despair of human relationships, he speaks words of forgiveness, he speaks words of reassurance to the thief at his side, he speaks words of comfort to his friend and mother, encouraging them to care for each other. He is always drawing us into community, into relationship with him, with the Trinity, with our fellow human beings. Forgiveness is part of the gift that makes this possible.

Over the years the question has been asked, was Judas forgiven?

There were a set of windows commissioned over a number of years for a Dorset Church whose original stained-glass windows had been destroyed in the war. They were made by the artist Laurence Whistler, remarkable works of etched glass, and 12 were installed. He offered to make a 13th window on the theme of forgiveness, depicting Judas. The Church said no, and though he made it they refused to receive the gift. The window shows a man hanging and falling from his hands are coins that gradually turn in to flowers. As

one looks at it, one realises that the noose is being used not to hang him but to hoist him upwards – even Judas is forgiven by God.

*Judas, if true love never ceases,
how could you, my friend, have come to this:
to sell me for thirty silver pieces,
betray me with a kiss?
Judas, remember what I taught you:
do not despair while dangling on that rope.
It's because you sinned that I have sought you;
I came to bring you hope.*

*Judas, let's pray and hang together,
you on your halter, I upon my hill.
Dear friend, even if you loved me never,
you know I love you still.*

- Peter de Rosa

30 years after it was made, the window was installed in the Church, and it is known as the forgiveness window.

Jesus' message is that relationships of trust and friendship are part of what it is to be fully human. He also teaches us that we and others will not always get it right. We may hurt each other, we may betray each other's trust, and the consequences may be catastrophic.

To deal with this complex mess we need forgiveness. Sometimes we are capable of this ourselves, we forgive and we seek forgiveness – forgive us our trespasses we pray, as we forgive those who trespass against others.

Sometimes the betrayal is too much for us, the hurt too traumatic, the failure to take responsibility too diminishing, and then like Jesus on the cross, we need to pray, "Father forgive them". Trusting that what we cannot do, God can do for us. And then we continue to build relationships, sometimes repairing damaged ones if that is possible, sometimes finding the courage to trust in new places because this is what it is to be human, and this is how God treats us.

Time and again we let God down, as the confession puts it 'through negligence, weakness and our own deliberate fault'; through the things we do and the things we do not do. Time and again God forgives us, constantly calling us back into relationship. For the foolishness of God is to love simple humans like you and me, and the weakness of God is to forgive our failings and blot out our offences.

Jesus calls us into the wonder of the relationship with the one who knows us better than we can know ourselves, who sees the light and the dark, and puts faith in our ability to be who we were made to be. Who invites us in to the heart of the Godhead where Father, Son and Holy Ghost co-exist in a unity of love.

‘Spiritual Bodilyness’

Maundy Thursday

(29 March 2018)

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

The wisdom of the world values the rare and exotic, precious metals, gems and exquisite art, the foolishness of God imbues ordinary things, bread and wine, with grace, making the mundane extraordinary.

When I administer the host at communion I like to look at the hands held out to receive. I reflect on the difference in age, skin tone, and size. Some are work worn, the callouses obvious, others are beautifully maintained, manicured; some show signs of the arthritis that is seizing up the joints painfully restricting movement, some are the young hands of children carefully and respectfully held in the gesture they have been taught. There is something momentous about placing into each set of hands the small wafer so insignificant and yet so full of God’s love. “The body of Christ”, I say, placing this sacrament onto part of the body of another to be eaten, taken in to the very bodily being of this person. We have an embodied religion. God in Christ took on our human bodilyness.

In tonight’s service we remember two aspects of what has become known as the Last Supper. We remember the washing of feet and the sharing of bread and wine. Simple ordinary gestures filled with significance for ever after.

The washing of feet was presumably something in ordinary households that you did yourself, a simple everyday act of making yourself ready for the meal. Last year on a trip to India we were hosted by some local colleges in Chennai, and learnt to queue up with all the students to wash our hands before the meal which we ate with our fingers. Here as you reclined together, it was polite to wash your feet. In wealthier houses the task would be done by servants or slaves. When Jesus castigates Simon the Pharisee in Luke’s gospel for his begrudging hospitality he says – “you gave me no water to wash my feet”. Then we are told that a woman washes them for him with perfumed oil and her hair. We can wonder whether as Jesus readies himself to wash his disciples’ feet he remembers the woman who washed his.

At this meal the disciples are faced with the unsettling experience of Jesus’ moving around the room washing their feet. He is clearly not the appropriate person to be doing this, and it takes an ordinary process cleaning feet with water and drying them with a towel and makes it an extraordinary process because of who is doing it. One can imagine that the room hushed, that the individuals at the dinner were conscious in a heightened way as their feet were touched. When a servant did this it could simply be received as

one's due, a polite way of cleaning the dirt off. When Jesus is kneeling at your feet and washing them it becomes an intimate act full of significance.

It is easy to understand Peter's response. He feels the inappropriateness of Jesus' taking on such a menial task, and feels that he can show his understanding by not participating. Jesus gently explains that this is a refusal to receive from him, a rejection of what is being freely offered, and Peter jumps in with both feet, "well, wash all of me then", and again Jesus needs to ask him to receive what is being given, for it is all that is necessary.

We understand Peter's confusion; we so often struggle in this way, we don't accept from others because we think we are being humble, only to find that in fact it is our pride that has stopped us from receiving from them, that we have met generosity with rejection. Or we confuse some kind of self-abasement with humility, getting so caught up in our own unworthiness that we become of little use to others.

Jesus constantly speaks in stories and signs because they can carry and convey more depth of meaning than a lecture or sermon. Each of the disciples will remember what it felt like to be touched in this way; each will remember the complex mixture of humility, unworthiness, intimacy, honour and generosity that the action stirred up in them. And they will remember that they are told to do likewise, and know that they have to ponder on what that means, not a literal call to wash people's feet, but a calling to serve others in generous ways that make them feel cherished and precious. A willingness to humble themselves that others may feel lifted up. An understanding that human ideas of status need to be challenged within the world of God's kingdom, where Christ the Lord kneels at his subject's feet.

And this symbolic act is a practical one. The feet we assume needed washing. It is at one level messy involving water and dirt. It is also an embodied act: real feet, real water; human bodies touching each other. You can't wash someone's feet at a distance, you have to touch them.

So in pondering what it might mean to do likewise, we need to understand that we are called to get involved, to risk mess and intimacy, to be practical, get close to people, to touch and be touched.

It is not though an indiscriminate calling to get overly involved, as Jesus said to Peter, "it's just your feet that need washing". But it is a calling to understand that following Christ is not some cerebral pastime in which we are called to be disciples in our heads and in our own space. It is a call to be disciples in our physical interactions with others, in the spaces and places where we touch or fail to touch the lives of others. In the ordinary messy practicalities of life.

After washing the disciples' feet Jesus feeds them, he takes the ordinary staples of the meal, bread and wine, blesses them and shares them. Again it is an invitation to

participate, the disciples need to take what is offered in the spirit it is offered. And again it is a bodily experience, physical food ingested by human bodies.

Like the washing of the feet it involves ordinary actions made extraordinary because of who Jesus is and what his invitation to participate means.

It is given as gift, a gift to bring us into communion with him and with each other. It is a touching gift that requires us to do something with our bodies to reinforce the commitment of our hearts and minds.

And it is a constant reminder and calling to us to take the ordinary every day aspects of our own lives and to find out how we can use them in serving God and our neighbour. It is a reminder that God uses what is to hand, and what is offered, to reach out and touch us with his love. It is a reminder that we need to be humble enough to both receive from God and others, and also to give to God and others. And it is a reminder that the Christian life is a calling to a practical life, faith lived out in action. We are to be involved in the world Christ came to save. To love God with all our body, mind and soul and to show our love to our neighbours in practical, generous, gifting of who we are and what we can do.

The foolishness of God is choosing to speak to us in the everyday, allowing God's self to be accessible, approachable, touchable, stooping to our level that we may be lifted into the eternal presence.

‘The Folly of the Cross’

Good Friday The Liturgy of the Cross (30 March 2018)

Isaiah 50: 4-10; Psalm 40: 1-10; John 6: 35-40; Isaiah 53: 1-12; Psalm 22;
Hebrews 10: 16-25; Psalm 25: 1-10; John 12: 23–26, 31–33; John 18:1 - 19:42.

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

(1 Corinthians 1:18-25)

In our world death is to be avoided. We are constantly urged to eat, drink, exercise and behave in ways that will keep death at a distance. Our medical facilities work hard to keep people alive. Drug companies spend millions on research to find drugs which may only increase life span in some diseases for a matter of months, but are welcomed never the less. And of course this all makes sense. We know what it is like when someone we love dies, we know the pain of grief and the awful finality of their absence. We intellectually know that death is inevitable for us all, but we live hoping somehow it will not touch us or those we love. And when it does happen, people find it hard to talk about. They discuss losing someone, people passing. Death is a taboo subject.

Many years ago in a discussion about religion with my sister a research scientist she said, “Biology is my religion”. Her husband said, “No, it is not a religion for it has nothing to say in the face of death”.

Good Friday brings us sharply up against suffering and death. The details are harsh. Jesus was whipped in a way that flayed his skin, the thorn crown was forced onto his head to humiliate and to hurt. The timing of events, an all-night trial so that he was exhausted, the walk with the cross up the hill in the hottest part of the day encouraging the sweat of his body to increase the pain of the broken skin, the rough wood of the cross, the nails, the exposure, the thirst, the slow painful suffocation – all of this torture aimed to maximise the physical pain which he had to bear. Yet he seems to accept this death, doing nothing to resist.

The cross was an example of humanity's inhumanity. A carefully thought up process of execution, used as an expedient means to get rid of a potential trouble-maker; a collusion between the religious status quo and the oppressive regime. It was meant to put an end to the teachings of Jesus.

Here we have a violent death, death at the hands of others, state-sanctioned execution. We know such things happen, we understand that Jesus is not the only innocent man to be killed on the orders of others. I knew a woman once who used to scoff at the idea of three hours of crucifixion. Her husband had died in a Japanese prisoner of war camp after months of starvation, torture and mistreatment. What is three hours, she would say?

We know that humanity has done even worse than crucifixion, terrible as that was, and we know that torture, both authorised and hidden, continues to be part of human reality. Suffering inflicted by humans on other humans, justified by twisted ideas of expediency, continues to be part of the dark side of human existence.

As we reflect on the events of Good Friday, we should not minimise and sanitise the physical horror of Christ's crucifixion, yet nor should we suggest that it was the worst ever kind of suffering.

What it was and what it represents is the reality of human suffering deliberately inflicted. Man's inhumanity to man. Not pain that is part of the human drive for survival, the kind of pain that might lead to new birth or new achievements, the pains of labour, the sweat and toil of work. The real and at times debilitating pain that arises out of the dislocation of the created world. No, this is pain inflicted to destroy; it is deliberately designed and consciously exacted. It is the pain inflicted by bullies, by oppressive regimes, by those who hold onto power through force rather than conciliation.

Jesus accepts this suffering, enduring the cross without reproach. The folly of this, the confounding of wisdom, arises because this was not simply the killing of an innocent man, horrendous as that is. The folly is that Jesus was not just a human, the fullness of God was present, God incarnate, very God of Very God.

So at some level we proclaim that God experienced not just the horror of the cross but the reality of death. It is this scandalous suggestion that Paul calls a 'stumbling block' to the Jews and 'foolishness' to the Gentiles. How can the Creator of all that is, the Almighty, Eternal Being experience the very mortal finality of death? It makes no sense. It is both foolish and weak.

Theologians and Philosophers have struggled with this and continue to do so. Some want to see Jesus as simply an exemplar. We look to him as an example of how to live and how to die, an example of patient courageous suffering and forgiveness. Yet is that enough? There is also a danger in this position; it can end up glorifying suffering, as if

the cross itself is the good news. Look how patiently Jesus suffered, go and do likewise, is not a healthy message for any of us.

If we believe in the incarnation, then at some level God was on the cross. If this were not so, then Jesus' death would be just another brave man dying. And if the fullness of God that was in Jesus experienced death that impacted on the fullness of God present in the rest of the Trinity.

Some theologians have sought to emphasise both the utter sense of alienation of Jesus on the cross: "My God my God why has thou forsaken me?" ... and the utter sense of loss in the heart of God the father at this gulf. On the cross, God incarnate not only dies but in doing so experiences the estrangement from God that is part of the human condition. And God the father knows the loss of the beloved. We thus assume that in the Trinity there is a total experience of the most profound emotions, knowing that in saying that we are using human terms to express the inexpressible.

The saddest sound I have ever heard was a mother sobbing for her dead son as we laid him in the grave. His father was Jamaican and the custom is for all the men to fill in the grave, usually the women sing hymns while this happens, but everyone was so grief-stricken at the death of this little boy that they were silent. All we could hear was the earth falling on the coffin and the howling grief of a mother who had lost her only child.

Thus in the reality of the cross we find God somehow experiencing the abandonment of death and the deepest of pain, that is the loss of the beloved. Humanity's deepest fears and pain become recognised and held within God's very being and because of this they are redeemed.

Now we can trust that God understands us, as the hymnwriter Timothy Rees puts it.

*And when human hearts are breaking
under sorrow's iron rod,
then they find that selfsame aching
deep within the heart of God.*

What the early church came to believe, and what they have handed down to us, is the insistence that this death was real and its reality changed eternity. Somehow the worst that could happen to a human, the utter annihilation of life, had been absorbed into God and remade in the wonder of Resurrection. The evil of human violence and torture, transformed by divine love.

Those who gathered at the cross on the first Good Friday came with different hopes. Some, his friends, his mother, came hoping against hope for a miracle. Just as so many of us hope and pray while we watch our loved ones suffering.

Some came hoping for a spectacle. “Save yourself,” they cry, not expecting much but willing to be surprised. Some came to gain a form of ghoulish pleasure from watching another suffer, it somehow boosts their sense of righteousness. There is a dark desire to watch the fall of someone who had seemed so popular. Some were there just doing their job. Somebody has to do it and the more you do the more hardened you become, not allowing yourself to think of the personality of these individuals. Allowing their sentence to dehumanise them. And Jesus does not save himself, the miracle does not happen at this point. Jesus dies.

The miracle comes through this death and beyond, when the dead body of Jesus becomes the risen body of Christ. Something did happen, and it was so much more than a spectacle. Jesus didn’t save himself, he saved the thief by his side, the weeping women, the fearful disciples, the forgiven torturers, the ones who stood and jeered, and he saved us and all humanity.

This is what inspired the early church that death was somehow defeated, that darkness could be transformed into light, that love triumphed. As David Jenkins, former Bishop of Durham, used to say, “There is nothing in human life that is so low that God in Christ cannot stoop down to it.”

On the cross Jesus took our greatest fears, pain, alienation, death into the aching heart of the Godhead. It looks to the wisdom of the philosophers, to the worldly wise, as an illogical impossible foolish claim. But because Jesus did this, we are made at one with him and at one with God. ‘At-oned’, as Julian of Norwich so beautifully puts it, atoned.

This is our salvation. This is our hope. Our promise of transformation for us all.

Two years ago I walked through the valley of the shadow of death with my brother. He lived in our home for the last months of his life as the cancer reduced his freedom, eating at his body and brain with painful relentlessness. He had patiently endured the aggressive treatments. He had enjoyed the time bought by these, despite all the complications that came with them. He had longed for life. Now we faced the inevitable. The end when it came was peaceful, and so very sad, he was only 49.

Yet, we walked this journey in faith. Our prayers did not lessen the pain he endured, our faith did not reduce the sense of loss and the sadness that such a good man had died so young, but it did aid our parting as we firmly believed that death is not an end, that beyond it is the eternal love of God, that in Christ we shall all be made alive.

Christ Crucified, foolishness to so many of the worldly wise, but to us the power of God and the promise of salvation. And so in faith and gratitude we dedicate ourselves to all that brings life until the time we will face death, trusting in Christ, and find it to be the gate into everlasting life.

‘The Myrrh Bearers’

Easter Vigil

(6.00am - 1 April 2018)

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

In the Eastern Church they are known as the Myrrh Bearers, these women who rise early on the Sunday morning and make their way to the tomb carrying the oils to tend to the body.

Traditionally eight women, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, Salome, Mary the wife of Cleopas, Mary and Martha of Bethany, and Mary the mother of Jesus are known as the Myrrh Bearers. The first five are named in the gospels as some of the women who came from Galilee with Jesus. Mary, Martha and Mary the mother of Jesus are traditionally included, though the gospels do not mention them as part of the early morning group.

We know that the women had watched from a distance at the crucifixion. There was nothing they could do to change the situation, but they offered their loving presence, their witness to these tragic events. They stood, and in doing so, stand with women down the ages who have watched their loved ones suffer through the brutality of military rule.

They followed, we are told, to where the borrowed tomb was located and noted its position, and then they had to wait.

Nothing could interrupt the Sabbath so, grieving and broken, they kept the Sabbath rituals and the Sabbath rest. Once the Sabbath was over they could act. They could do nothing to alleviate the suffering of Good Friday, but they could perform the last acts of love for the body of their beloved Jesus. The precious oils, the herbs and spices were gathered together and the party of women made their way, just as the sun was rising, to the garden tomb.

This was a rather foolish mission, they knew the tomb had been sealed with a stone and they had not thought through how this was to be moved. They speak of this, but it does not stop their journey. They are driven by this need to show love, even though the one they love is dead. To treat with honour his body, to do what they can.

As the sun rises they arrive to find that a miracle has happened, the stone has been rolled back and the grave is open and an angel greets them with the standard Angel greeting, ‘do not be afraid’. They are told that the one who was crucified is not here because he is alive, they are told to go and tell the disciples. Mary Magdalene and Mary encounter the Risen Christ, and he also tells them not to be afraid but to go and tell the others.

The faithful vigil of the women, their love that took them to serve the body beyond its life is rewarded with the first news of the resurrection, the first encounter with the Risen Christ. Mary Magdalene in the Orthodox tradition is the Apostle to the Apostles.

They left their homes in darkness and now they are in the light. They left in grief and now they are in wondrous joy. They left with a sense of finality and despair and now they have a purpose and hope. And yet it is not easy.

The news they bring is so impossible, so beyond any imaginings so contrary to logic, so far from the wisdom of the world that they are afraid. They are afraid that they will be judged mad, emotional, hysterical and we are told that they are – that their Good news is dismissed as idle tales of women. And their names, apart from Mary Magdalene, go largely forgotten. And her story is muddled with that of other women Jesus encountered so that she becomes not the one entrusted with the news of the resurrection but a reformed prostitute a perpetual image of a fallen woman, albeit redeemed.

And so today we have come. Early in the morning to hear again the news of the resurrection to find our darkness turned to light, to pray that our griefs may be transformed by joy and that our despair may be transformed by hope.

Christ is Risen – Alleluia! And yet it is not easy.

We seek to be people of faith in a world which seems incredibly deaf to the words of hope we try to speak. The wisdom of empirical proof finds our tales of Resurrection impossible and our trust in God emotional. The materialism that shapes the cultures in which we live is confused by a dead body that is now alive in ways that do not conform to the normal patterns of materialistic existence. Our faith is judged by inappropriate criteria. Our tales are dismissed as outdated superstition, quaint tradition, comfort for the susceptible.

I like to think that the women took strength from each other, that their shared encounter deepened their faith. I hope that when the men also encountered the empty tomb and met the risen Lord that they affirmed the women.

What we do come to see, as these early Christians see the Risen Lord, and then post Ascension and Pentecost receive the Holy Spirit, is that it is in coming together, in sharing together the word and the sacraments, that faith is built up, hope is strengthened and the good news is proclaimed. And so the church came into being; the community of the faithful witnessing to the wonderful crazy love of God.

We need each other, we need the shared sense of faith, the strength of gathering with others whose experience knows that, however impossible these truths may seem according to the wisdom of the world, our reality is bigger.

Our reality has room for the God who can do the impossible, the God who has overcome death, who has overcome sin and evil, who has revealed the depths of love for each of us. Our reality knows that we are never alone, that though we may fall, we will never be destroyed, though we may falter, we are journeying to the promised land.

Our hearts are sustained by the sense that we are beloved, we know the peace of God which passes all understanding. Love's redeeming work is done and we are the redeemed.

So together on this Easter morning we sing and we proclaim: Alleluia Christ is Risen!

‘Alice Laughed’

Easter Day

(1 April 2018)

Acts 10: 34-43; Hymn to the Risen Christ; 1 Corinthians 15: 1-11; John 20: 1-18.

‘Alice laughed: “There’s no use trying,” she said; “one can’t believe impossible things.” “I daresay you haven’t had much practice,” said the Queen. “When I was younger, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”’

So goes a conversation between Alice and the Red Queen in Alice’s adventures in *Through the Looking Glass*.

I now live in the house where Alice lived, Alice-loving tourists peer up at my windows and take photos outside my front door. Not of course that Alice in Wonderland was real, but this was the home of Alice Liddell the girl whom Lewis Carroll made up the stories for. Her father was Dean of Christ Church Oxford as my husband now is. Our family room is always referred to as Alice’s room. It feels rather incredible to watch TV in the very room that *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* were first read to young Alice.

If you look out of the window in that room across the Cathedral garden you see a door in the wall. It looks tiny. The particular angle of sight means that you cannot see the steps down to what is a perfectly normal height doorway. From Alice’s room it looks as if you would need to shrink to pass through it. Alice was not allowed into this garden, she had a perfectly large garden at the Deanery to play in, but she never got to see this door close to, so from her view it was always tiny.

The book, written for her by a mathematician, is full of different perspectives, impossible things, things that do not seem as they might appear. Things that need to be looked at in a different way, perhaps from a different angle, perhaps only understandable when you stand in a different place. Practical Alice ponders on the ease with which others believe the impossible.

Many beyond the walls of this church laugh at the seeming impossibilities that we believe. Today is April Fool’s Day and we know that there are plenty of the worldly wise who think it the height of foolishness to gather in Church to affirm our belief in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. And some of us did it before breakfast!

Yet, here we are. We have come to affirm our faith in God, Jesus as God incarnate, his crucifixion and resurrection, things that from the perspective of many seem unreal, but from our perspective of faith make sense of all that is and will be.

Over Holy Week I have been reflecting on Paul's verse in 1 Corinthians – 'The foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of the world'.

As people of faith we see the world from a different angle. We are called to look beyond the material and finite to the glimpses we have been given of the eternal. For in God things that seem impossible are in fact gloriously real. From where we stand the door to heaven is now open and wide enough for us to pass through.

Jesus Christ is Risen.

Jesus died on the first Good Friday a real death, and on the first Easter morning he was alive, resurrected. The women who had seen Jesus die on the cross and watched him laid in the tomb came to anoint a dead body. They found an empty tomb and news of resurrection.

This makes no sense and so Mary Magdalene looks for a logical explanation – someone must have moved the body, it seems the only reasonable answer. She asks the man she supposes to be the gardener only to find that he is the very person she is looking for, not dead but alive. Go Mary, she is told, go and tell the good news.

However many times Jesus had hinted at the possibility of resurrection to the disciples, nothing could prepare them for the reality. This is extraordinary, and it continues to be so. This living Jesus does not function in the same way as he did before he died. He appears and disappears at will, and yet he is no ghost. This is real bodily flesh, he eats with them, he invites them to touch the wounds of his execution. The risen Jesus is a breaking in of eternity into our mortal world. A sign of what lies beyond our sight, a hope of what God promises we too might know. An invitation to see the world from God's perspective.

In order to make sense of this, the companions of Jesus need a total paradigm shift. Everything they know of Jesus must be looked at afresh. And so, they begin to understand that Jesus was more than a prophet, more than the promised king; for this to be true, Jesus must be part of the eternity he represents, God of God, light of light, begotten not made, of one being with the Father who stooped down, and for our sake became human. They have a new perspective.

One of the wonderful things about working in an Oxford college is I get to talk to people studying very different subjects. A few years ago, I went to a talk given by a young astrophysicist. He had been asked to briefly explain his work to non-scientists. He drew a pie chart. He said if this is all there is to know about the universe, then this large shaded area (about 70%) is the stuff we still know nothing about. This smaller 22% is what we know something about, and this small 8% is what we know about in incredible detail. We then extrapolate from the things we know, the things we sort of know, to make educated guesses about what we do not know.

This to me has a clear parallel to my Christian faith. We know that there is so much to know about God that we do not, from where we are, have the capacity to see or understand. If God is the Creator of all, then it is no surprise that we cannot explain or know everything about the divine reality.

There are things we know something about, the tenets of faith handed down through scripture and tradition that we take to be truths, though we cannot explain how they work, incarnation, resurrection terms that we have traditionally used to explain the inexplicable involvement of God in the world. And then there are things we know a great deal about – aspects of our own lives and the world we live in which reflect the God who created them.

We know that the scared disillusioned disciples became confident in proclaiming their faith. We know that women and men down the ages have found courage even to face death because of their faith in the resurrection. We know what we have experiences of the peace of God in our hearts, the sense of the divine in moments of prayer and worship, the inexplicable sense of being challenged and comforted by the Spirit of God. For these things to make sense, it seems reasonable to believe that God is real and in Christ reaches out to draw us in.

We know that at our best as human beings we love, we show kindness, we collaborate to create new things, we rejoice and delight. And it makes sense to believe that God is all of these qualities and more. We know that the world is full of renewal, variety and beauty. And it makes sense to see something of God's nature in the wonder of the world.

My intellectual questioning mind asks: but how can I know, how does any of this talk of God, resurrection and eternal life fit into the categories of knowledge I have been taught to value? Where is the empirical proof? At times I am with Alice struggling to make sense of it all.

Yet my heart and soul knows that there is much in the world beyond empirical facts and measurable outcomes. The wonder of love, the unexpected moments of joy and laughter, the capacity to be moved by the story of another.

And I know that some of my knowledge of God is at the heart level, or in some sense at the gut level. As a child I was taught to sing:

*He lives! He lives! Christ Jesus lives today!
He walks with me and talks with me
Along life's narrow way;
He lives! He lives! Salvation to impart,
You ask me how I know he lives, he lives within my heart.*

And so we trust this heart knowledge. We take what we know, including the witness handed down from Mary Magdalene and those first women at the tomb, the disciples and

the earliest church, through the teachings of the scripture and the lives of the faithful throughout the ages, and we reflect on what we know in our own experience in our understanding of the world, and we can then be bold to speak about the things beyond our knowing. Affirming that we look at the world from the perspective of those who believe in the resurrection.

The resurrection of Jesus was and is unique, God breaking into the limits of our world and showing us something of the truth beyond what we can see.

Trusting that this truth is in line with all that we know about God and all that we know about God's creation, we are able to say love is stronger than hate, life exists beyond the finality of death, good overcomes evil, hope overcomes fear.

As Paul says, Jesus is the 'first fruits' – the promise that will hold true for us all. For in Christ shall all be made new.

So today we rejoice that we, like so many before us, can believe the impossible and proclaim that Jesus Christ is risen, trusting in God's wisdom and God's love. We thank God for the capacity to see the world from a different angle, to know that the tiny door is in fact big enough for us to walk through, and that the garden, we as yet just glimpse, will be our eternal home.

Christ is risen! Alleluia! And the resurrection is good news for us all.