Holy Week Addresses 2020

Monday: John 12.1-11

Tuesday: John 12.20-36

Wednesday: John 13.21-32

Maundy Thursday: John 13.1-17, 31b-35

Monday – Jesus is anointed

This year we journey through Holy Week in the company of St John’s Gospel. However familiar the passion narrative may appear there are always new truths to be discerned and revealed from fresh reflections and the work of the Holy Spirit within us. As we hear these familiar words each evening, I invite you to ponder and savour them, almost as if you were hearing the story for the first time.

We begin with the anointing of Jesus by Mary of Bethany, Lazarus’ sister and the sister of Martha.

Conscious of the difficult days that lie ahead, Jesus has returned to his friends, to the house of Simon the Leper according to the accounts of the same story in the gospels of Matthew and Mark. This was such a human decision on Jesus’ part. Any of us, about to be separated from friends and family, would do precisely the same. We would return to the familiar, to be surrounded by those we love and who love us, and yet, as we will discover, even here Jesus cannot escape controversy and debate.

This episode in the passion story is retold in three gospels – Matthew, Mark and John. Yet unusually it is the version in John’s gospel that has the most narrative detail. John is perhaps better known for his theology rather than for his story telling and yet it is in John’s gospel that we are told all of the following detail: that this event took place six days before the Passover, the day before the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, that it took place where Lazarus had been raised from the dead, that Martha again took up her role of serving the meal (had she not learned from that earlier encounter with Mary and Jesus I wonder?) and that Lazarus was at supper with them. Most important of all perhaps, it is in John’s gospel that the woman is identified as Mary and the complaining disciple is identified as Judas – Matthew and Mark simply refer to a woman coming to anoint Jesus and indignant disciples upset at the waste of expensive ointment.

The extraordinary detail in John’s account serves his theological purposes. Like Matthew and Mark the anointing of Jesus is representative of a rite of preparation for burial. This is the one opportunity to honour Jesus in this way and so the cost and waste of ointment is immaterial compared with the loss of Jesus. But whilst the woman in Matthew and Mark’s accounts anoint Jesus’ head, a customary act of courtesy to a guest, Mary anoints Jesus’ feet, and with her hair. Here is powerful symbolism of the worth of Jesus’ entire being; he who is the resurrection and the life.

All the gospel accounts were written long after the events they portray but John’s gospel was the latest written, possibly 60 or 70 years after the resurrection. Not surprisingly there is plenty of scope for John to write back into his account an interpretation of the event described. And so it is with the blatant destruction of Judas’ reputation, not only portrayed as the only disciple to question the woman’s waste of ointment, but also denounced for being a thief. Here is fake news working its magic; for the truth or otherwise of the thief allegation is irrelevant compared with the impact it had upon his character for those listening to the story for the first time. Judas joins Jesus as the scapegoat for others.

Now at this point I need to share my discomfort at Mary’s wastefulness. I’ve always been uncomfortable with this story and with Jesus’ response, for the implication that if the poor are always with us, that we can relax and not care about them too much.

But this is not what is intended. We are not being presented here with priorities for the Christian life – no one is suggesting that worship of Jesus is more important than caring for the poor. Rather that faithfulness to Christ, the honouring of Jesus as the Christ, is the essential pre-requisite for effective Christian service to others. Our motivation for ridding the world of poverty is not a form of secular altruism but is derived from our faith in which each life is honoured for its origins in the divine; as each member of humanity is made in the image of God, so each life deserves to be honoured by God and for God. It is our faith that drives the Christian life and our faith begins with faith in Jesus.

Six days before he is crucified some of Jesus’ closest friends acknowledge who he is and what is to become of him. And yet his disciples – in John’s account represented by the lonely Judas – still don’t grasp Jesus’ significance. As we shall see this week, right until the very end, the identity of Jesus will remain disputed.

“Who do people say that I am?” Jesus asks.

Who do we believe Jesus to be?

Tuesday – Jesus keeps teaching to the end

This year we journey through Holy Week in the company of St John’s Gospel. Last night we reflected on the episode in which Jesus is anointed by Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. This outraged Judas because of the waste of expensive perfume it involved. Jesus responded by commending Mary for honouring him as the Messiah.

If tonight’s reading also feels very familiar, well, that may be because it was the gospel reading set for a week last Sunday. As with yesterday’s reading, this passage is full of narrative detail that supports John’s broader theological purposes.

The passage begins with the disciples in a bit of a quandary. Some Greeks – proselytes rather than Greek speaking Jews – had arrived for the feast of the Passover keen to meet with Jesus. They approach the two disciples with Greek names - Philip who consults with Andrew and they then both go to find Jesus. Jesus’ response is not to go and speak with the Greek worshippers, but instead to teach Philip and Andrew about discipleship and that all are honoured by God, Jew and Greek. “If anyone serves me, the Father will honour him”. Even at this late stage, Jesus is still teaching the disciples the fundamentals about his identity, his relationship with God and what it means to be called by God to follow Him. Jesus is underlining the essentially universal character of the Christian faith, whilst emphasising that this universality is only possible through his death and resurrection.

The passage then takes a more troubling turn with Jesus expressing anxiety about the future in words almost identical to those he would utter in the Garden of Gethsemane later in the week. “Father, save me from this hour?” he asks. “No, he answers to himself, for this is why this hour has come, this is my purpose.”

I’ve always found great comfort in those moments when Jesus expresses flashes of doubt before regaining his composure as the Son of God. It’s as if the two sides of Jesus – human and divine – are struggling with each other; we witness the human side of Jesus emerging at times of great stress before falling back and submitting to the divine core of his being. Jesus’ ministry began with temptation in the wilderness only for it to end with temptation in the garden. He could have saved himself but would have then failed to save us.

“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

Here is an obvious truth from nature, but also a deeply theological truth about Jesus’ passion. Only with the death and resurrection of Jesus has it been possible for the promise of universal salvation to reach all humankind.

The analogy of the grain of wheat dying in order to bear much fruit, is also true of our own lives. We’re reminded of this in the imagery of the baptism rite as we die to our old selves and find new life in the waters of baptism. That process of death and re-birth continues throughout our lives as we tentatively accept the divine nature that lurks within each one of us, awaiting liberation.

If we are to become truly ourselves as God intends, then we must rid ourselves of the ego and all that promotes our self-satisfaction and self-preservation. Such thinking, sadly, has been the root of much abuse in the life of the church and continues today in one guise or another. Yet at its heart the principle remains true too. For each of us to flourish as human beings made in God’s image, we need to think more of others and less of ourselves. In the end we will discover that the whole of life is about God, and nothing else.

The poverty of our human nature is of course one of the attractions of the character of Peter in the passion narrative; we connect readily with his inadequacy, his cowardice, his embarrassment at having anything to do with the one who is now universally mocked; with his willingness to protect himself by denying Christ (who after all wouldn’t behave as Peter did faced by an array of soldiers?) And yet in denying Christ, he denies himself the opportunity to be Christ too.

This is where the Easter story begins to hit home. For this is the invitation that Christ offers us – to become part of the Christ story ourselves; to be absorbed into his nature, his identity and join in with the mission of God in this world. This is evangelism at its most raw and beautiful through which the gospel becomes irresistible to those who encounter it, for faced with Love itself, who can avert their gaze?

Wednesday – Jesus betrayed

This year we journey through Holy Week in the company of St John’s Gospel. So far this week we’ve thought about the mixed messages conveyed by Mary’s anointing of Jesus with expensive ointment and Jesus’ commitment to teaching a universal gospel of salvation to Greeks and Jews right through these closing days of his life on earth. We’re aware of tension between Jesus and his followers and within Jesus himself too - and the strength of this is brought home powerfully to us tonight in the revealing of the betrayer himself.

Jesus is deeply distressed and reveals his fears to his disciples – one of you will betray me. Inevitably the gossip begins: who? Who is it? Who is going to do this to Jesus? His closest friend, the one whom Jesus loved, extracts the confidence from Jesus in the seemingly innocent passing of a morsel of bread. Jesus then urges Judas to get on with it – and out Judas goes into the physical and spiritual darkness of the night.

As I write these words I imagine myself right there amongst them all watching these terrible events begin to play out.

And I have to admit finding myself feeling a little sympathy for Judas. Just as Jesus absorbed into himself all the pain and sin of the world through the cross, so I am conscious of the way tradition has poured upon Judas all the responsibility for betraying Jesus. Yet we know we are as vulnerable to self-interest as Judas was; we are just as culpable in our denials of Christ.

It isn’t accidental that only seven verses later – shortly after this evening’s passage is concluded - Jesus predicts Peter’s denials – “truly truly I say to you”, Jesus says, “before this night is out you too will have denied me three times.” Jesus wasn’t going to let the rest of the disciples get away with blaming Judas for everything that was to follow. Jesus immediately shows them their weakness too – as indeed he reveals ours this and every Holy Week. We like to think ourselves as accompanying Jesus to the cross this week, yet in truth we are accompanying Judas and Peter too. I’m not sure which I find more uncomfortable – or from which I find more to learn.

John mixes narrative with theology in his typical easy style that can lead us to overlook the significance of some themes that flow through his passion. One of them is the theme of glorification. We have heard Jesus say tonight: Now is the Son of Man glorified and in him is God glorified; if God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once.

This doesn’t sound like the voice of Jesus to me, especially when it is immediately followed by pastoral words of comfort and instruction from Jesus to love one another as Jesus has loved us.

So what is John trying to say through his theme of glorification, words almost certainly that he has put into Jesus’ mouth long after the resurrection?

This isn’t the first time this week that we’ve heard this theme expounded by John, nor will it be the last; rather it is a theme that has been building in tandem with the growing tension of the passion story.

On Monday it was merely hinted at when Jesus defended Mary’s actions in anointing Jesus by reminding his disciples of the imminent death of their Messiah. And then last night Jesus twice reminds his disciples that the time has come for God to glorify his name through him. And then this evening John makes the definitive statement on glorification in a tongue twister almost as confusing as the Prologue to John’s gospel on the incarnation that we read with joy each Christmas.

The timing is all important. Jesus talks of glorification immediately once Judas has left to get the final stages of the journey to the cross underway. Thanks to Judas the great act by which God will be glorified has now begun, and through it all truth will be revealed for all humanity for evermore. The identification of the betrayer – that moment of greatest tension and darkness in the entire story of these final days – is also the means by which the tension will be broken forever and eternal light break in to the world for all to see by.

For John the glorification of God through Christ’s passion begins with Judas, it does not wait for the resurrection itself. God is glorified in Judas, in Peter, in Caiaphas, in Pilate, in Barabbas, in the crowd, in the Roman soldiers, in the cross….as well as in the resurrection.

John’s rendering of the passion story reminds us powerfully that yes we are partly selfish like Judas and yes we are partly vulnerable like Peter, but that despite that we too are the means of glorifying God, the means by which God is revealed and known.

And as Good Friday creeps ever closer with all the guilt this day traditionally brings, here is the hope to which we cling. For God is at the heart of the worst of times; even when we are in the deepest, darkest of places ourselves, we are never alone. Hope is always at work.

Thursday – love one another

John 13.1-17, 31b-35

This year we have been journeying through Holy Week in the company of St John’s Gospel. Tonight, we arrive in the Upper Room for the Last Supper.

St John’s gospel is remarkable for many things, not least the poetry of its prose and depth of its theology. But it is also remarkable for one omission in particular. The institution of Holy Communion is entirely absent. In the passion narrative there is no mention of Jesus taking bread and wine, of giving thanks for them, of breaking the bread and pouring the wine and then of sharing these gifts amongst the disciples in remembrance of Him. None of this is in St John’s gospel.

Instead Jesus washes feet.

New Testament scholars address this oddity in a number of ways. Some suggest that John would have presumed that his readers knew the synoptic gospels or parts of them; others draw attention to John 6 which covers the theology of holy communion – Jesus is the bread of life - more than adequately. Others point to the unity of the gospel of John as a whole and especially to the universal and eternal theme of communion that flows through the gospel from its very beginning – In the beginning was the Word...

But…even taking all this into account, John’s focus on the disciples’ feet and not on his legacy appears remarkable.

Or is it?

John’s introductory commentary tells us all we need to know: “having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”

The Teacher has one last opportunity to convey the core of his purpose to his disciples. Throughout the last three years of his ministry, words alone have repeatedly failed to communicate Jesus’ true identity and message. Time and again, straightforward teaching has had to be dressed up in parable and analogy; even miracles couldn’t persuade all of Jesus’ followers of his truth.

As they lay around at that last meal together, I imagine Jesus desperately trying to think of some way of getting the disciples’ attention.

He turns to drama for impact and does the absolute unthinkable; he reduces himself to the status of a lowly servant and washes his disciples’ feet. How the disciples must have stared at one another in disbelief.

But even worse was to come as Jesus declares: now, I’ve given you an example. Go and do likewise, wash one another’s feet. Go on…a new commandment I give to you….that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. This is the only way people will know that you are my disciples….by the way you love one another.”

As performance benchmarks go, this one is pretty tough. And without intending to sound flippant, this may account why the church sometimes struggles. So often we fail at this most basic of tests, we fail to love one another as we have been loved.

Many churches re-enact the washing of the disciples’ feet as part of their Maundy Thursday services. Until coming to this benefice it was a very much a part of my experience of church, along with the drama of stripping the altars and the vigil that follows.

If the prospect of washing one another’s feet unnerves you a little, then perhaps there is even more reason to do it. It is humbling to wash another’s feet and humbling to receive such care too. And yes it does feel odd the first time.

Washing each other’s feet is not simply a symbolic re-enactment of events long along; for it is an act of love, an act of communion as intimate as any breaking of bread together. Yes, it is shockingly effective at breaking down barriers between people. But it is even more shockingly effective at helping us to enter the story of Christ’s passion and become One with Him. Perhaps John didn’t include the institution of holy communion in his passion narrative simply because he didn’t need to – an act of loving service conveyed everything on its own.

People who know they are loved, love well. People who know they are loved by God, have the potential to love perfectly.

And at the heart of the Christian tradition lies the idea of sacrificial love, unconditional love that gives oneself up for others, epitomised by Christ’s giving of himself for us on the cross.

Often quoted as an example of this is Maximilian Kolbe, the polish friar who famously gave up his life for another in Auschwitz. Last week another name was added to this list of Christian martyrs - Lt. Col. Arnaud Beltrame of the French police who swapped places with a terrorist’s hostage and later died as a result of injuries he then sustained. He was due to married in a Roman Catholic Abbey this summer.

We may not be called to such sacrifice. But we are called to countless acts of selfless love analogous to washing one another’s feet.

And every such act is an act of communion – an act of taking the ordinary things of this world, ourselves, giving thanks to God for the blessings of our lives, and then pouring ourselves out so that others too may share in the good news of what Christ has done for us.

Whatever else we learn this Easter, my prayer is that we learn to wash feet.

Amen.