

Holy Week 2017



On remembering

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Palm Sunday

Palm Sunday is the beginning of Holy Week, a time when we meditate on the last days and hours of Jesus' earthly life, and try in some sense to walk with him on his road to the cross and to stand beside him as he breathes his last. If you have read the Witney Way you will know that the theme for this week of addresses is 'On remembering'. I had a new book out last month on the subject of dementia, so I have been thinking about memory a lot over the last couple of years – both the brain science of memory and its spiritual significance.

In my address this morning, standing at the threshold of Holy Week, I want to say a few words about the nature of memory and the nature of the events that we will be remembering together.

From time to time (and it seems increasingly recently) the television news reader warns us that 'the following report contains scenes that some viewers may find distressing', offering us the choice of averting our eyes or changing channels. The first thing for us to remember is that the passion of Jesus is the same; it's one long series of upsetting scenes. The passion is fundamentally a trauma.

In the world of mental health a traumatic event is defined as one involving actual or threatened death or severe harm serious injury to those we love or to ourselves. Trauma is physically frightening, but more fundamentally it is something that disrupts our story. We are getting on with our lives, doing our own thing, ploughing our own furrows, when suddenly we are stopped in our tracks. Our plans are in tatters, our assumptions about the world are shattered, and we find ourselves standing in the midst of what has been aptly called 'narrative wreckage'. One way of thinking about all this is as a kind of spiritual and psychological dismembering.

If people are to survive trauma and come out the other side stronger then they have to re-member, to re-build themselves in the light of events. Often, telling the story of the traumatic events, putting them in order, is an important part of this; indeed trauma survivors often feel compelled to bear witness to what has happened to them. In their book *Trauma and transformation* the psychologists Richard

Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun say this: ‘Growth occurs when the trauma assumes a central place in the life story.’

A writer who will be more familiar to you – Rowan Williams – puts it like this:

Memory is the ‘self’, because it is my presence to myself, the way in which I constitute myself and understand myself as a subject with a continuous history of experience. ...It is no accident that long-term prisoners – in concentration or labour camps – for instance – have so often felt the need to ‘recover’ not only their own past, but a whole cultural and religious tradition, a shared past which can genuinely be seen as an alternative and liberating reality. To affirm one’s identity, value, solidity, reality in situations where his is being systematically crushed, to affirm that one is ‘spirit’ involves the owning, the recovering of a past, a liberating memory.

Williams is saying that remembering is a profoundly spiritual activity. But how do we re-member? As I wrote in my Witney Way article, ‘We don’t read our memories off some sort of video recording in our brains. Instead we take bits and pieces and reconstruct a story, often filtered through our feelings, in the light of later events, and with help from others. We foreground the stuff that subsequently turned out to be important or meaningful and we often do this in conversation with others.’

When we remember *together* we bring building blocks – often in the form of flashbulb memories - and we try and put them together to make a bigger story than we could make by ourselves.

About 6 weeks ago I went through a bit of a trauma. My daughter phoned me at 2.00 in the morning to say that she thought she was going into labour. She already has an 18 month old and she needed me to look after him. I got a couple more hours sleep, drank a cup of strong coffee, jumped in the car, drove through Storm Doris, and got to her house by 6.00 ... the baby eventually arrived safely that night.

I’ve gone over all the events that adrenaline-fuelled day several times in my head. I’ve looked at the text trail on my phone which says things like ‘I’m setting off now’ and ‘are you OK?’ It’s one of

the building blocks of my story. But another is a flashbulb memory of the warm salad that was delivered just before my daughter left for hospital. She and I have talked about that a few times as we have re-told the story to each other, putting the chaotic events into some sort of order. It was the story of a good trauma – but it was still a trauma.

In John Chapter 16 Jesus talks about the impact of his impending death as being like childbirth:

Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labour, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world.

He is framing the events as a good trauma – the anguish is remembered in the light of joy; and notice also his emphasis on time. The woman's *hour has come*. Time was an important part of my story, too.

The link between memory and time is very strong, and it's particularly so in John's Gospel. Good remembering takes us back in time, helping us make sense of things, and it brings the past into the present to that it can inform the future.

This is how we are to understand the passion narratives in each of the four gospels -as the re-rememberings of the first Christian communities in the years after Jesus, as they started to realise that the terrible trauma that they had experienced was in fact a good trauma. This week we too will remember, and as we often do this by asking ourselves questions I have organised each address around one of five questions: when, who, why, how, and what? And at points in each address I will say something about memory and dementia.

We will be re-remembering by listening, questioning, and reflecting, but also by sharing bread and wine together. After all, when Jesus broke the bread and gave the cup he said 'Do this in *remembrance* of me.'

Here's a quote from my book:

When the Eucharist is celebrated a Christian community is re-constituted as the body of Christ in that place; its individual members are gathered together and re-membered through their communal re-appropriation of the memory of Christ.

So, as we prepare to receive Christ in bread and wine and to be re-membered, I offer this prayer from the Iona Community for us, the body of Christ in this place:

As the bread and wine that we will share become for us your
body,
vibrant with your life,
healing, renewing and making us whole.
And as the bread and wine which we will eat and drink are
changed into us,
may we be changed again into you,
bone of your bone,
flesh of your flesh,
loving and caring in the world.



Monday: When?

John 12

1 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.

3 Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said,

5 "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

6 (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)

7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.

8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

9 When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

10 So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well,

11 since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

Yesterday I spoke on the topic of trauma, reflecting on the fact that Jesus' passion is essentially a series of distressing scenes, which together can be considered as trauma – *the* ultimate trauma, in fact. I reminded us that in Chapter 12 of John's Gospel Jesus describes this as being like the good trauma of childbirth, and that in doing this he places an emphasis on time – 'When a woman is in labour, she has pain, *because her hour has come.*' Trauma has a lot to do with time, because trauma has a way of breaking into our settled cycles of time. Coming to terms with trauma, growing through it, involves remembering, and remembering too has a lot to do with time.

One of the questions we ask as we remember or are called to give evidence to a court is ‘when?’ We need to know when stuff happened so that we can put it in chronological and therefore a logical order. A couple of years ago my husband did some research that showed that CS Lewis was converted to Christianity a year later than people had previously thought – in 1930 rather than 1929. This is significant because during that year his father had died. Knowing which came first – the bereavement or the conversion is important in making sense of what happened.

If we turn to this evening’s Gospel reading we see that John’s remembering of Jesus’ passion begins with a very specific date – six days before the Passover. This is hugely significant because for John Jesus is the Passover Lamb of God – something that we will consider in more detail on Thursday.

This opening verse looks forward to the Passover but it also looks back to the raising of Lazarus. The previous chapter of John’s Gospel told the story of Jesus bringing Lazarus back from the dead and how the Jewish authorities reacted by deciding to kill him. They reckoned that they could catch Jesus when he came to Jerusalem for the Passover. Suspecting what was afoot, he retreated to a town called Ephraim about 10 miles outside Jerusalem. But he did want to go to Jerusalem for the Passover, so as the time drew nearer he travelled secretly to the village of Bethany – the very place where Lazarus had been raised. Bethany was a was perhaps more like a suburb of Jerusalem than an isolated village. We might think of this in terms of Jesus hiding out in Witney while the police were looking for him in Oxford, but then venturing back just as far as Wolvercote, biding his time before entering the city.

John is setting the scene, poised at the threshold of the passion, by reminding us of this back-story, interweaving the past with the present. It’s as if he is saying, ‘You remember Lazarus? – you remember what happened?’ In doing this he reminds us what a *risk* Jesus is taking in travelling to Bethany, and especially to this particular house. The threat of violence is in the air.

And then something memorable happens. We know that this incident, of a woman anointing Jesus, being criticised and judged by

some of the men in the room, but in stark contrast being defended, indeed praised by Jesus, must have been a strong memory in the early church. We know this because the story is one of the very few incidents from the life of Jesus that is recounted in all four Gospels.

The Gospel writers each tell the story from a different angle with different details. They differ on the identity of both the woman and her detractors, the location of the incident, the objections raised by the onlookers, and whether Jesus' head or feet were anointed. The stories are like a kaleidoscope image made up from fragmentary memories – memories of something that was in its own way a mini-trauma, something that interrupted and violated normal ways of being and behaving. The facts are a bit of a mish-mash but the emotions of shock, offence, and conflict come across strongly all four versions.

So why remember such an uncomfortable incident at all? The answer seems to be that Jesus commanded it. In Matthew and Mark's version he says this:

“Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

And so the kaleidoscope pieces are brought together and the story is woven – like Witney blankets – from truth and trust. For Luke the story is about forgiveness; but for Matthew, Mark, and John the story is about timing. Jesus contrasts the one-off action of the woman at a crisis point with the constant presence of the poor, quoting the book of Deuteronomy which states that the poor will always be in the land. He's not talking about neglecting the poor – the argument about poverty is a red herring. He's talking about reading the signs of the times – knowing *when* to act. The woman – his hostess Mary in John's version - intuitively senses the danger to Jesus and acts on her good instinct – to anoint him with a wildly extravagant amount of costly perfume.

With the wisdom of hindsight the disciples realised the woman was right. She wasn't bonkers; she was a prophet. Jesus would be dead within the week. Her action started to make sense and was fitted into the bigger picture of the passion.

This fitting of things together to make sense is something we do increasingly as we approach the end of our lives. Indeed, some things only make sense with the hindsight of years. In the last week of his life an elderly friend told me a story. When he was engaged to be married he and his fiancée searched in vain for somewhere to live. It was just after World War II and, like today, there was a shortage of affordable rental accommodation. It looked very much as if they were going to have to begin their married life living with his parents. Then, a few days before the wedding, a large flat became available at a reasonable rent. My friend and his wife had often said to each other that this was like a wonderful miracle. But in his last days he returned to this part of his life and he remembered something odd; he had a flashbulb memory of his aunt whispering conspiratorially to his mother-in-law shortly before the flat became available. This aunt was wealthy and had contacts in the property business. Over sixty years after the original incident he realised that she must have slipped someone a financial sweetener to secure the flat for him. He had always thought this aunt rather cold and aloof; in his last days he was filled with gratitude at her love and care for him and his new bride. He felt compelled to tell me the story in remembrance of her.

Of all the four Gospels it is John's that claims to have been written on the basis of eye-witness accounts, and I am inclined to believe that our Gospel reading this evening contains material written or spoken by someone who was actually present at the anointing, perhaps reaching back many years to the original incident. I think this because of the inclusion of one detail 'the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.'

Scent is highly evocative of memory – it takes us right back. Perhaps we never forget smells. Certainly in dementia scent can sometimes be a way of unlocking memories that seem to have fled. [There follows the story of a man with dementia who 'came alive' in response to the scent of lily-of-the-valley.]

Perhaps the people who were present when the woman anointed Jesus were getting old when the Gospels were being written down. Perhaps their memories were fading a bit. But there is more than one sort of remembering, and that smell was unforgettable.

To paraphrase a verse from the very beginning of John's Gospel – one we read every year at our Christmas Carol services:

we have seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelt his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.



Tuesday: Who?

John 12

20 Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks.

21 They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

22 Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

23 Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

24 Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

25 Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

26 Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

27 "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say-- 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.

28 Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again."

29 The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him."

30 Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine.

31 Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.

32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

33 He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

34 The crowd answered him, "We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?"

35 Jesus said to them, "The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the

darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going.

36 While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light." After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them.

Yesterday evening at Hailey we began our remembering by reflecting on the importance of time and asking the question 'When?' We saw that six days before the Passover Jesus returned from Ephraim to stay at Bethany which was nearer to Jerusalem. Here he was anointed by Mary. John goes on to say that people found out that he was there and became very excited as they realised that this meant that he was coming to Jerusalem for the Passover. When he finally arrived in the city, riding on a donkey, they greeted him rapturously. John tells us that:

His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, *then they remembered* that these things had been written of him [in the prophets] and had been done to him.

Here again we have the theme of making sense some time after the event with the wisdom of hindsight.

Time is also important in this evening's reading. At Bethany Jesus had been poised between his ministry and his passion. Now he exclaims 'The hour has come!'

But to understand this fully we need to ask another question: 'Who?'

Jesus declares that the hour has come because Andrew and Philip have told him that some Greeks want to see him. This may seem like an odd thing to say it's because we haven't noticed a word that keeps coming up right through John's Gospel. In Greek it's *kosmos* and in English it's 'world.' Here are some examples:

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. (1.9)

"Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! (1.29)

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (3.16)

Jesus didn't come for a particular group. He didn't come for the Jews. Despite the words of that hymn 'The church's one foundation' he didn't die for the church. He came, died and rose *for the whole world*. He knew this, and when he was told that God-fearing foreigners – Greeks - were being drawn to him he realised that his mission was nearly accomplished. Notice how later in the reading he says 'when I am lifted up from the earth I will draw *all people* to myself.'

Jesus then explains what coming for the whole world means – and it involves a good trauma. Not this time the trauma of childbirth, but the transforming trauma of a seed that falls into the ground and gives its life so a plant will grow from it.

In my book on the Lord's Prayer I said this about Jesus' story of the mustard seed that we know well from the other gospels:

The planting of the seed, and its death in order to germinate, can be understood as the death of Jesus. The pushing of the shoot upwards, breaking the surface of the soil and becoming clearly visible as a great and growing plant, can be understood as the raising of Jesus. The growth of the tree to full maturity, with its many branches stretched out, can be understood as the flourishing of Christ's body, his people. The branches spread out into the world, offering a safe and welcoming place for all who encounter them. The tree stands tall as a beacon of hope. The hope is our hope and it is hope for the *whole world*.

That world includes people with cognitive impairments such as with dementia. The Swiss theologian Karl Barth famously argued:

those, who as far as human reason can see, possess neither reason, responsibility nor ability to make decisions:...Are they not children of Adam? Has Christ not died for them?

We need to keep thinking about making our churches ever more welcoming, communities that re-member those who can no longer remember for themselves.

But there is another ‘who?’ question that is raised by tonight’s reading. Who is Jesus?

Jesus refers to himself as ‘The Son of Man’. This is a mysterious phrase that might have been an Aramaic way of saying ‘me’ but also has hidden depths of meaning. The crowd are really getting into the question of ‘who?’ and they seem to think that ‘Son of Man’ alludes to a title used in Daniel Chapter 7 which was understood by some to refer to the Messiah coming on the clouds. But actually the most natural meaning of ‘Son of Man’ is the way it is translated in modern English versions of the Book of Daniel – simply as ‘human being’. And several scholars think that Jesus was essentially calling himself ‘The human being.’

Jesus of Nazareth was a human being – one of us. He wasn’t a superhero from another planet, not some sort of angel or disembodied spirit. Remember: John tells us that Jesus has a soul and it is troubled; he has feelings – he weeps at the death of his friend Lazarus; he has a body that gets tired so he has to rest in the shade by a well and he gets thirsty so he has to ask a Samaritan woman to use her bucket to get him a drink. Jesus is in complete solidarity with humankind.

Yet it’s in Jesus’ decision to obey his Father, even while his soul is troubled, that we see that he is more than human. In Jesus – the Word made flesh - God has lowered himself to come and pitch his tent among us, but with the lifting up of Jesus the divine human being, God lifts us up also, through suffering and death, to become divine ourselves.

In our Gospel reading the ‘who?’ and the ‘when?’ questions come together as Jesus embraces his mission and makes his ‘now!’ statement’:

Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.

And he goes on to intimate that the light is failing and time is running out. He is urging us to make some sort of decision, to see who he is and to respond; not to remember just by ordering events to make sense of things, but to remember by entering into the story, making it our 'now' – seeing the present as the gateway to eternal life.

In yesterday's address we thought about looking back and looking forward. This evening, I am inviting you to inhabit the 'now' more fully. Dwelling in the present is something that most of us find really difficult, fretting about past mistakes or nursing grudges, worrying about the future – our minds dominated by a whole series of 'what ifs?' and 'to do' lists. But some people are rather good at inhabiting the 'now' – young children and people in certain phases of dementia may have a lot to teach the rest of us about how to receive what has been called the sacrament of the present moment.

R.S. Thomas puts it beautifully in his poem, 'The bright field':

I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the
pearl of great price, the one field that had
treasure in it. I realise now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it.

Life is not hurrying
on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.



Wednesday: Why?

John 12

21 After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me."

22 The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking.

23 One of his disciples-- the one whom Jesus loved-- was reclining next to him;

24 Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking.

25 So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?"

26 Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot.

27 After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "Do quickly what you are going to do."

28 Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him.

29 Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the festival"; or, that he should give something to the poor.

30 So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

31 When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.

32 If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.

On this Wednesday of Holy Week we continue our reflections on memory and time. On Monday we saw that the woman who anointed Jesus had correctly read the signs of the times; Jesus was poised on the threshold of his passion. In yesterday's Gospel reading Jesus indicated that time was rapidly running out; there is only a limited window of opportunity to respond to him – we must seize the

moment. In today's reading the time has arrived. The Greek tense changes: Jesus no longer talks about his glory as something that is just about to happen but as something that *has* happened.

Now the Son of Man *has been* glorified, and God has been glorified in him.

There is, of course, more to happen as the events of the passion play out, but the die has already been cast.

The emotional temperature has gone up. There is a sense of unsettlement and uncertainty. Jesus is again deeply troubled, but unlike in yesterday's reading this is not so much about the soul-trouble of reaching the decision to go to the cross but the spirit-trouble of personal betrayal. Jesus knows the heart of Judas.

Facing a violent agonising death is one thing; facing it because you have been betrayed to it by a friend, by a person you have cared for and nurtured, is something else. If you want to get an idea of what Jesus was going through you could do worse than read Psalm 55:

My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me.

Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me.

And I say, "O that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest;

truly, I would flee far away; I would lodge in the wilderness; I would hurry to find a shelter for myself from the raging wind and tempest."

...I see violence and strife in the city.

Day and night they go around it on its walls, and iniquity and trouble are within it;

ruin is in its midst; oppression and fraud do not depart from its marketplace.

It is not enemies who taunt me-- I could bear that; it is not adversaries who deal insolently with me-- I could hide from them.

But it is you, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend, with whom I kept pleasant company; we walked in the house of God with the throng.

Unlike Jesus, the disciples have no idea what is going on. They are utterly confused. In Matthew's version of this incident each disciple asks if *he* is the one. It's not obvious to them that the betrayer is going to be Judas. But of course all would become clear to them in the light of events and then the disciples look back and attribute evil motives to him from the start. Notice how in yesterday's reading John couldn't resist saying that he was a thief. As the disciples remember Judas their vitriol spills out, but behind the vehemence of their blaming lies a sense perhaps that it could actually have been any of them and a relief that in the end it wasn't.

The confusion continues. There is a private exchange between Jesus and Judas – something about bread and acting quickly. There are some attempts to make sense of this – but these are only best guesses, and John tells us that

No one at the table knew *why* he said this to him.

And this is our question too. As the death of Jesus draws relentlessly closer we are drawn into the confusion and we too are confused.

Why did Judas do what he did? Over the years people have come up with lots of ideas – political or psychological. John, perhaps wisely, doesn't waste time on this. He simply says that Satan entered in to Judas. We might not find this particularly helpful, but it seems to have been a good enough explanation for John and his community.

But perhaps the more important question is why did anyone have to betray Jesus at all? Couldn't he just have gone and given himself up to the religious authorities? And why in our reading does Jesus seemingly tell Judas what to do? It's all a bit of a mess.

And come to think of it why did Jesus have to die at all? If I was God I wouldn't have planned the salvation of humankind in this way.

As I came to this story afresh this year, a smaller scale but even more troubling 'why?' question jumped out at me: why did Jesus give Judas bread? – the only bread mentioned in John's account of the last supper on Passover Eve. Surely this should be the bread of life, not betrayal and death? As I pondered on this it seemed to me

that there is something here about choice, about what you do with the window of opportunity, the last moments of light before night falls. There's something about the way Judas receives the bread, about the way he hears the words of Jesus. He makes his decision – and at that moment John tells us 'It was night'.

When darkness falls in our lives, when we are faced with adversity, betrayal, illness, ageing, death, dementia we quickly reach for the 'Why?' question. When I worked in the NHS I carried out some research that involved interviewing 100 survivors of stroke, spinal cord injury, and severe head trauma. I was interested in the emotional impact of their conditions. I asked them, amongst other things, what thoughts went through their heads when they reflected on their situations. The most common thoughts by far were 'Why?' 'Why me?' 'Why *this*?' 'What have I done to deserve it?' As I have gone on to work with people affected by dementia more questions have come into play: 'Why can't this be cured?' or 'Why him?' 'Why her?' 'Why us?' 'Why does a life well-lived have to end in this desperately sad and undignified way?'

In the Old Testament 'Why' questions like this are repeatedly and angrily asked by Job:

"Why did you bring me forth from the womb? Would that I had died before any eye had seen me, and were as though I had not been, carried from the womb to the grave. Are not the days of my life few? Let me alone, that I may find a little comfort before I go, never to return, to the land of gloom and deep darkness, the land of gloom and chaos, where light is like darkness."

Job gets unsatisfactory answers to his 'Why' questions from his comforters – most of which boil down to 'Well you must have done something wrong.' With a very good instinct Job refuses to accept these answers and in the midst of his anguish and unknowing he says something that will turn out to be prophetic:

I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see *on my side*

In the end Job never gets the answer to his ‘why?’ questions; I think one of the things we have to learn to accept in this life is that, while it’s natural to ask ‘why questions’, they are often unanswerable. But Job gets something better than an answer – he gets to see God, and he finds that the why questions don’t seem to be quite so important in that light; not only is God’s understanding bigger than Job’s ability even to frame questions, but much more importantly, God has come to be with him in his suffering and indeed is on his side. Like many of us, Job finds that he has unexpectedly received what Isaiah calls the ‘treasures of darkness’.

Coming back to our Gospel reading, it is in the midst of the deepest darkness – at the point that John says ‘it was night’ that Jesus starts to speak of Glory. For as we know – again from our Christmas readings:

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.



Thursday: How?

John 13

1 Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

2 The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper

3 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God,

4 got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.

5 Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

7 Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

8 Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me."

9 Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!"

10 Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you."

11 For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

12 After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you?"

13 You call me Teacher and Lord-- and you are right, for that is what I am.

14 So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.

15 For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.

16 Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them.

17 If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them...

31b Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.

32 If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.

33 Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'

34 I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

36 Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus answered, "Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward."

37 Peter said to him, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you."

38 Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.

Jesus said to Peter 'You do not know what I am doing, but later you will understand.'

This week we've been looking at the run-up to the Passion in terms of the questions 'When?', 'Who?' and 'Why?' and this evening we turn to 'How?' All these questions are set in the broader frame of remembering and of time.

As we turn to John's account of the last supper, it is obvious that it is different from that of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John does not tell us about a Passover celebration hosted by Jesus. He tells of a meal that happened - in his words - '*before* the festival of the Passover'. There's a good reason for this: John sees Jesus as not as the host of the Passover meal but as the Passover Lamb itself. In John's Gospel

Good Friday is not the day after Passover, but the day before Passover – the day the paschal lambs were slaughtered. John's theology is evident in his use of time. It's a theology echoed by St. Paul when he says in 1 Corinthians:

‘Our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed.’

So much for time, but what about remembering?

In Luke's account of the first Easter morning the women come to the tomb and are confronted by two men in dazzling clothes who tell them ‘Remember how he told you’ – ‘Remember how’. So how did Jesus tell people things?

Well, he used stories and parables, but he also did things in a certain way – what are sometimes called parabolic actions – to get his point across. Our Gospel reading tonight describes consummate example of this.

First Jesus gets up from the table. He stands tall, taking on his destiny, knowing that

‘the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God.’

Then – in a detail we can easily miss – he takes off his outer robe. Some of you will know that this year I have been studying for an MA in Christianity and the Arts at the National Gallery in London. I know a lot more about the Italian Renaissance than I did 6 months ago. One of the things that I have learnt is the importance of veils – the way in which sacred pictures and sacred spaces are veiled and unveiled using curtains, and of the depiction of curtains and veils in the pictures themselves. This is because unveiling signifies a revelation of the divine. The Greek word for revelation is *apokalupsis* which literally means ‘unveiling’. We obviously get our word ‘apocalypse’ from this. Apocalypse doesn't mean the end of the world – it means revelation.

So, when John tells us that Jesus removes his outer robe he is signalling an unveiling or revelation of the divine nature. Jesus is

about to show us something important about how God is. More than that - he is about to show us how to become more like God.

We all know – and this is backed up by research – that children learn best not by being told but by being shown. Human beings are natural imitators. When my mother died I inherited her Parker fountain pen – she'd had it since the 1950s. It has great sentimental value for me because, amongst other things, she used to use it to write sick notes to get me out of PE lessons. I wanted to use it and I bought some ink but the filling mechanism is very old-fashioned and I had no idea how to do it. I looked it up on line but I couldn't make much sense of the instructions. Then I had an idea – I went on Youtube and found a whole series of videos showing you how to fill different models of vintage Parker pens. They were clearly made by a man who was a bit obsessed by them. But never mind! One look and my problem was solved – I simply did what he did and it worked.

When Jesus washes his disciples' feet he is saying 'Look at me and do it this way.' In doing this he firstly shows us how God is – intimate, physical, hands-on, not afraid to get down, not above getting dirty, tender and gentle.

And if this weren't enough he shows us how to become what we are – the body of Christ. It's important to attend carefully to Jesus' words here, because they continue to be mis-interpreted regularly by the churches. He doesn't tell the important ones in the group to go and find some lowly people and wash their feet – he's not talking about condescension. He tells the whole group to wash each other's feet – to learn to serve and to receive service – he's talking about solidarity – about the re-membering of the community.

And talking of remembering, it turns out that we not only *learn* best by imitation – we also *remember* actions better than we remember words and facts.

Last year I had to do some knitting. I hadn't knitted for a long time and, as I read the pattern instructions I wondered if I could remember how to cast on. I looked down and saw that, without noticing, I had already cast on several stitches. It was as if my fingers had remembered what to do without my having to think about it. The technical name for this is procedural memory, and it's

one of the last types of memory to go in dementia. Some of you will have experienced this when a person with severe dementia holds out their hands for the bread and wine of communion. It's a very moving thing to witness.

Like Peter, we can all receive love even when we don't consciously understand it. And remember that – once again from our Christmas reading:

to all who received him, he gave power to become children of God,

What's more it's possible to carry on with the habit of giving love and care even when our memory for all else is gone. To illustrate this I want to end with another story about an outer garment. I heard this at one of our Witney DAA meetings. A family was visiting an elderly relative in a care home. Their little girl was getting bored so they decided to let her out into the grounds to play. A lady with advanced dementia had been sitting inertly in the corner of the resident's lounge, apparently unaware of her surroundings. As the little girl moved towards the door this lady suddenly sat up and said – 'She'll need a cardigan on – it's chilly out there.'



Good Friday: What?



My addresses this week have all been on the topic of remembering and I have approached this by asking a series of questions: ‘When?’, ‘Who?’, ‘Why?’ and ‘How?’ As we come to Good Friday we face up to the last question ‘What?’: ‘What happened to Jesus at the hands of human beings like us?’

The way this question is phrased is important. Once he was arrested Jesus stopped doing stuff; instead, stuff was done to him. The word ‘passion’ has the same Latin root as the word ‘passive’. The point of Jesus’ passion is that Jesus stops being active and becomes passive. In doing this he, a young man, took on the character of an old or frail human being.

The nature of Jesus’ passion and death was an intense version of the ageing process. Jesus becomes an object, handed from pillar to post, about whom decisions are made, and to whom things are done, stigmatised, weakened and enfeebled. In the space of a few hours he underwent the rigours of advancing years. And so, even though he died young he too experienced the stripping away of capacities that we all go through as part of the ageing process. He places himself in solidarity with us all, young and old, fit and feeble.

1. Remembering Adam

John 18

1 After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered.

2 Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples.

3 So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons.

4 Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, "Whom are you looking for?"

5 They answered, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus replied, "I am he." Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them.

6 When Jesus said to them, "I am he," they stepped back and fell to the ground.

7 Again he asked them, "Whom are you looking for?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth."

8 Jesus answered, "I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go."

9 This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken, "I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me."

10 Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave's name was Malchus.

11 Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?"

12 So the soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police arrested Jesus and bound him.

We are all familiar with the phrase 'The Garden of Gethsemane', so you may be surprised to learn that this phrase isn't to be found in the Bible. Matthew and Mark tell us that Jesus and his disciples went to a place called Gethsemane. John tells us that they went to a garden. It's *our memories* that bring these two things together and harmonise

them into a single place. But we need to be careful about this because we could miss something important.

John is at pains to tell us that this place was a *garden*. Why might that be? Perhaps he wants us to remember another garden – a garden where everything went horribly wrong, where two people felt entitled to grasp at something that wasn't theirs to take and as a result fell victims to shame and became alienated from God.

But in *this* garden the opposite is happening – what went wrong is being made right. St. Paul puts it this way:

‘Adam...is a type of the one who was to come.’ and
‘since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.’

Those of you who were at Tuesday's service at Curbridge will recall that I said that when Jesus called himself 'The Son of Man' he probably meant 'The human being.' Jesus is the last Adam. But when they come to arrest him in the garden Jesus says something else. On your service sheets you have a reproduction of Caravaggio's 'The taking of Christ'. Just as we harmonise the different gospels and come up with 'the Garden of Gethsemane', Caravaggio has harmonised the different Gospel versions here. One of the soldiers in the picture is carrying a lantern. He would be, because Caravaggio loves to play with light effects and shadow. And Caravaggio is also following John who mentions torches and lanterns to remind us of the deep darkness that is about to engulf them all.

But in the picture you can also see that Judas is about to kiss Jesus. Here Caravaggio is following Matthew, Mark, and Luke; for John doesn't mention the kiss at all. In the reading we have just heard Judas doesn't identify Jesus. Instead Jesus asks the crowd 'Who are you looking for?'. When they say his name he responds with the Greek phrase '*Egō eimi*'. This means 'It's me' – quite a natural thing to say if you are giving yourself up. But of course there's more to the phrase than that. Our English Bible translates it 'I am he' not because Jesus was posh and a stickler for correct grammar – but to draw our attention to a pun – I AM – the name of the nameless one, -

the one who spoke to Moses from the Burning Bush saying, "I AM WHO I AM." ... "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" The pun is not lost on the crowd: When Jesus says 'I am he' they fall to the ground.

So at the very moment that Jesus is to submit himself to capture and violence he asserts his divine nature. In doing this he does precisely the reverse of what Adam and Eve did in their garden. They tried to be like God and to grasp at what they thought was their entitlement. Jesus was God and he freely set his entitlement aside. This is how he makes things right – how he re-members the relationship between God and human beings. As St. Paul says:

though he was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God as something to be [grasped], but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.



2. Peter remembers

John 18

13 First they took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year.

14 Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people.

15 Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest,

16 but Peter was standing outside at the gate. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out, spoke to the woman who guarded the gate, and brought Peter in.

17 The woman said to Peter, "You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?" He said, "I am not."

18 Now the slaves and the police had made a charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing around it and warming themselves. Peter also was standing with them and warming himself.

19 Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching.

20 Jesus answered, "I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret.

21 Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said."

22 When he had said this, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face, saying, "Is that how you answer the high priest?"

23 Jesus answered, "If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?"

24 Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

25 Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They asked him, "You are not also one of his disciples, are you?" He denied it and said, "I am not."

26 One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, "Did I not see you in the garden with him?"

27 Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed.

I've mentioned at a couple of points this week that John's gospel claims to have been based on eye witness testimony. You get a real sense of this in his detailed account of events in the High Priest's house. I love the slightly pompous detail of the disciple who knew the High Priest putting in a word to get Peter admitted to the courtyard. There's also the significant detail of the charcoal fire, which we know with the wisdom of hindsight will appear again as a barbecue on the lakeside when Peter and Jesus are reunited after the resurrection.

The story of Peter's denial of Jesus is one that is burned into the memory of the early Church. Yet unlike the memory of Judas who betrayed Jesus, Peter's memory has been redeemed. Perhaps it's because what Peter did made no material difference to Jesus' fate. Perhaps it's because he always meant well. Perhaps it's because we all have experienced acting in shameful ways when overcome with fear and anxiety. We can certainly empathise with Peter's predicament but, even more than that, Peter offers us all hope. He messed up big time; but not only was he forgiven by Jesus, the future church was placed in his hands.

On Palm Sunday I talked about the events of the Passion as a type of trauma. In a way this is obvious – they were horribly violent. But the violence was more than physical. For the disciples the passion violated a raft of hopes and assumptions about the nature of God, the world, and the self. They went armed to the garden probably because they were expecting a whole host of angels to appear and to join with them to fight in a great cosmic battle against the powers of darkness. Of course a cosmic battle was indeed taking place, but it was not at all the type they were expecting. Instead of battling with the sort of awesome demonic figures we might be familiar with from films like *Lord of the Rings* Peter flails about and ends up chopping off the ear of a nonentity called Malchus. It's all embarrassingly mundane.

Earlier, John tells us, Peter has pledged his allegiance to Jesus:

Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus answered, "Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward." Peter said to him, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you."

I don't think Peter was a coward. I think if Jesus had led him into battle the adrenaline would have kicked in and he would have acquitted himself well. What he wasn't expecting or perhaps didn't want to consider – despite Jesus' earlier teaching – was what actually happened: the arrest of his master by a motley crew of ordinary human beings.

So he follows Jesus but is at a loss as to what to do, and in the midst of his disappointment and confusion, perhaps now doubting that Jesus is the messiah after all, he distances himself from him.

And then the cock crows and he remembers. He remembers his good intentions now lying in tatters.

But he also remembers Jesus' prophecy and he realises that Jesus was right about him all along; and in this there are the beginnings of hope. Peter begins to see that the problem was with his own understanding of Jesus and his mission – not with Jesus at all. For it turns out that Jesus knew him better than he knew himself. It's at moments like these in our journey of faith – the sort of moments experienced by Peter and before him Job (who we thought about on Wednesday) – moments where we say to ourselves – 'Oh! God is not as I thought.' that real spiritual growth happens.



3. Remembering who you are

John 18

28 Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover.

29 So Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?"

30 They answered, "If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you."

31 Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law." The Jews replied, "We are not permitted to put anyone to death."

32 (This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)

33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?"

34 Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?"

35 Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?"

36 Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

37 Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

38 Pilate asked him, "What is truth?" After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, "I find no case against him.

39 But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?"

40 They shouted in reply, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a bandit.

Jesus has been examined by Annas and Caiaphas the Jewish religious leaders, and he has now been brought to Pilate, the representative of the Roman administration. This whole episode is focused on the question of what it means to be a Jew. We already know that Caiaphas has the good of his people in mind. He has been worried that Jesus will become so popular that there will be a riot among his people. If the people riot Rome will come down on them like a ton of bricks – something that did eventually happen about 40 years after the death of Jesus. So it seems wise, if regrettable, to sacrifice Jesus for the sake of the people. You could argue that Caiaphas is trying his best to be a good Jew.

We are told also that the Jewish officials who take Jesus to Pilate do not want to contaminate themselves by entering a Gentile area. This may have been because of the Roman habit of burying corpses of loved ones in the house. These officials also want to be good Jews;

they want to eat the Passover with clean hands. The irony of this hardly needs pointing out: in trying to remember who they are they have instead lost sight of their true identity. Later they remind Pilate of the Roman ruling that prohibits them from executing people according to their own laws. They could have asked Pilate for permission to stone Jesus as a blasphemer but it seems that they preferred to pass the buck to him and get Jesus executed as a common criminal. Perhaps they thought that the horror and humiliation of crucifixion would be more likely to cow Jesus' followers and so avert a riot.

These religious folk have embraced rituals that have become empty and separated them from those who are different; they have embraced political expediency for their own ends. And when Pilate offers to free Jesus as a concession to the feast of Passover they reject the Lamb of God and accept instead a bandit. They have utterly lost their way.

Over the centuries these observations about the Jewish leaders at the time of Jesus have been shamefully used to support anti-Semitic attitudes and actions. But we have to remember that John's Gospel was written by a Jew. He is not criticising Judaism so much as the sort of religion that loses sight of what it was all about in the first place. As Christians we too are vulnerable to this charge every time we get so caught up in institutional church business or advancing our personal religious agendas that we forget the way of Christ.

In contrast to the religious leaders, Jesus remembers exactly who he is. He thinks back to his earliest days:

‘For this I was born, and for this I came into the world,

I'm going to read a poem called ‘The rapture’ by the seventeenth century poet Thomas Traherne. It gives a wonderful taste of the emerging consciousness of the child Jesus:

Sweet Infancy!
O Heavenly Fire!
O Sacred Light!
How fair and bright!
How Great am I

Whom the whole world doth magnify!

O heavenly joy!
O Great and Sacred Blessedness
Which I possess!
So great a joy
Who did into my arms convey?

From God above
Being sent, the Gift doth me enflame
To praise His Name;
The Stars do move,
The Son doth shine,
To show his Love.

O how Divine Am I!
To all this Sacred Wealth,
This Life and Health,
Who rais'd?
Who mine
Did make the same!
What hand divine!

It is perhaps something like this *joie-de-vivre* that Jesus is remembering when he says 'For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.' Pilate is finding it hard to tune into Jesus' voice, 'What is truth?' he asks. Jesus says nothing. He doesn't need to; the answer to Pilate's question is standing right in front of him:

God is love [and his] love was revealed among us in this way:
God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.



4. Remembering the emperor

John 19

1 Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged.

2 And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe.

3 They kept coming up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and striking him on the face.

4 Pilate went out again and said to them, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him."

5 So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!"

6 When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him."

7 The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God."

Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever.

9 He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer.

10 Pilate therefore said to him, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?"

11 Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin."

12 From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor."

13 When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha.

14 Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, "Here is your King!"

15 They cried out, "Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but the emperor."

16 Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

Pilate has Jesus flogged. You will know that this is not a mere slap on the wrists but a brutal beating with instruments designed to bite into the flesh. People often died from such floggings. Then in a cruel parody the soldiers place a crown of thorns on Jesus' head. (I pricked myself on a pyrocanthus branch the other day when I was trimming our hedge. I yelped and ran indoors for a plaster, and then I stopped and thought of the crown of thorns.) Jesus is hit in the face. When he is in this terrible state, bloodied, bruised, and barely able to stand, he is brought out in front of the people, and Pilate says his famous phrase *Ecce Homo* which in Greek is '*Idou ho anthrōpos*'. Traditionally this phrase has been translated 'Behold the man', but this is a bit misleading. The Latin *homo* and the Greek *anthrōpos* don't mean man, they mean 'human' Pilate is actually saying 'Behold the human being.'

Remember:

'since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being'

Unknowingly Pilate is making the point that in this state Jesus is standing in solidarity with suffering humanity, and in so doing he saves all of us.

There then follows a horrible dispute about the fate of Jesus that does no-one credit. Pilate sees something in Jesus that makes him afraid. And he is right to be afraid – very afraid for, as Jesus points out, he has no power over him. Perhaps Pilate is beginning to suspect the true state of affairs: it's not Jesus who is on trial, but Pilate and the Jewish authorities; and the judge is Jesus.

Yet this inkling of the truth is swept away by a more immediate concern. Pilate is reminded about the emperor Tiberius Caesar, and that concentrates his mind greatly. He daren't be seen as condoning sedition in any form. He has one last go at passing the buck back to the Jewish religious leaders. Their response is astonishing and it represents a form of dementia far worse than any brain condition could produce – for it is a spiritual dementia. They assert that their king is not the LORD God of Abraham, the one who created them, who spoke to Moses from the burning bush, who led them safely out of Egypt and home from Babylon – but Caesar a pagan political despot. Driven by fear, by the corruption of power, by the immediate demands of the moment, by group-think, they have forgotten themselves utterly.



5. Jesus, remember me

John 19

16b So they took Jesus;

17 and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha.

18 There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them.

19 Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."

20 Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek.

21 Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.'"

22 Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written."

23 When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each

soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top.

24 So they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it." This was to fulfill what the scripture says, "They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots."

25 And that is what the soldiers did. Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

26 When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son."

27 Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

28 After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty."

29 A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth.

30 When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

To be remembered by Jesus is to be recreated, to be seen for what we can truly be and to be offered the chance of becoming that person. I think the clearest example of this is St. Paul. This is how he tells his story to Agrippa in Acts Chapter 26:

I was travelling to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, when at midday along the road, ...I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and my companions. When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It hurts you to kick against the goads.' I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The Lord answered, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify

to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you.

And in his first letter to the Corinthians Paul writes:

Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, *even as I have been fully known.*

In an earlier meditation this afternoon I said that when the cock crowed Peter realised that Jesus knew him through and through – better than he knew himself. Paul found out the same thing. Jesus knew them both and in his remembering of them he called each of them to be the person he truly was.

As Jesus hung on the cross he looked down and he remembered his mother and the beloved disciple. Interestingly John doesn't say that Jesus issued all sorts of instructions as to what they should each do. Of course he was near to death and he could hardly speak. But I don't think that is the whole story. Jesus saw them as the people they could be – Mary a mother to his young friend; this young friend a son to his mother. Mary and the beloved disciple worked out the details of what that meant for themselves.

Once he has entrusted his mother and friend to each other his work is done. This is a beautifully observed detail – Jesus has been saving the whole world but his work on the cross is not finished until he has made sure that his mum is going to be OK.

As through all of his life, in his last agony Jesus had other people in mind. Luke tells of the repentant thief who asks Jesus to remember him. Jesus saw something in the man who hung beside him, perhaps something missed by others. Whatever it was, it was enough for Jesus to give him the benefit of the doubt and to invite him into paradise. Something creative is going on: it is through Jesus' remembering that this individual turns from thief into human person. The broken pieces of his life are gathered up and he is made whole – literally 're-membered'.

And it can be that way for us too. We are continually in pieces and in turning to the Christ who remembers us we are continually made whole.



6. Re-membering Jesus

John 19

31 Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the sabbath, especially because that sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed.

32 Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him.

33 But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.

34 Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out.

35 (He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.)

36 These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, "None of his bones shall be broken."

37 And again another passage of scripture says, "They will look on the one whom they have pierced."

38 After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body.

39 Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds.

40 They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews.

41 Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid.

42 And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

Where does the story of Good Friday end? For many years I think I assumed that it ended when Jesus breathed his last. There was a bit of a post-script when he was taken down from the cross, but I didn't really pay much attention to it.

In this I was wrong.

The trauma of that the passion of the Christ is, as we have seen, about the violation of assumptions about the self – I could have been the one to betray or deny Jesus; I am not as courageous and wise as I thought; I reckoned I could cope with whatever life throws at me – it seems not. It's about the violation of assumptions about the world; the worst of things happened to the best of people; the one we trusted was a traitor; we prayed but no miracle happened. It's about the violation of hope – 'we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel' – but it seems not.

But above all there is the violation of the body of Jesus – lacerated, beaten, and pierced, stretched out in a distorted posture. Unrecognisable, ugly:

he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.

It was usual for crucifixion victims to remain on the cross to be dismembered and eaten by scavenging animals. The fact that Jesus was taken down from the cross by loved ones, his body cared for, and laid to rest in a tomb is something to be remarked upon. The actions of Joseph and Nicodemus are a kind of re-remembering of Jesus, an honouring of his identity as an embodied human being. The tender care that they show him is reminiscent of the tenderness with

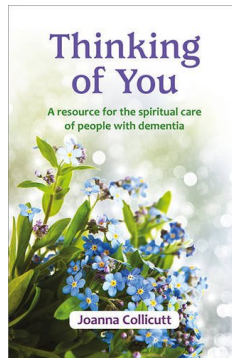
which Jesus washed the feet of his disciples at the last supper, and it has been a model for Christian devotion across the centuries. The window in the St George's Chapel – a window that is not to everyone's taste - is nevertheless a testimony to this. To lament in imagination over the body of Christ, to treat that body with honour, to receive that body into a heart lined with the clean linen of virtuous thoughts and acts, can be a form of prayer that brings peace and solace after the traumatic drama of Holy Week. It is also a way of connecting the loss of Jesus with the loss of others who have been dear to us.

But at the end of Good Friday, as we prepare to keep Easter Saturday we have to face up to one thing. The body eventually gets laid in the tomb. We cannot hold on to it forever. The entrance is secured and it is time to go home. Jesus has gone and, as night falls, we are on our own. As on the eve of his arrest, but even more so now, we have to learn to watch and pray, to inhabit an empty space between death and resurrection. A place of waiting. We must beware of trying to fill it up, of ruminating over the events of Good Friday or rushing prematurely to grasp at the joy of Easter Sunday, or of just keeping ourselves busy. All of those things may make our life easier, will help pass the time, but they will prevent us from appreciating the rich mystery of dwelling in the absence of Christ. This is a place of such deep paradox that it can only be expressed in poetry, as in these words of St John of the Cross taken from his poem, the Dark Night of the Soul:

This [dark] light guided me
More surely than the light of noonday
To the place where he (well I knew who!) was awaiting me—
A place where none appeared



Holy Saturday



Extract: Into the land of forgetfulness

Set between the death of Good Friday and the new life of Easter Sunday is a mysterious period that we know as Holy Saturday. This is a kind of twilight zone, a deeply ambiguous and shady space of watching and waiting. There is a tradition, dating from the early days of Christianity, and expressed in the Apostles' Creed, that Christ descended to what is probably best understood as the lowest place of the created universe, what we might call the 'underworld'. This descent has been located in that time between Jesus' death and resurrection, probably on the basis of his own words:

For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth.

At its simplest this descent is a physical image for the movement between Christ's death and raising; Christ is like a skateboarder or ski-jumper who has to go down in order to develop the momentum for his massive surge upwards. However, there's clearly more to it than that.

The place to which Christ descended has traditionally been understood to be *Sheol*, (or its nearest Greek equivalent, Hades). In the Hebrew Bible this is the state of being where individuals exist but are unable to understand, remember, or praise God:

Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise up to praise you?

Is your steadfast love declared in the grave, or your
faithfulness in Abaddon?
Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your saving help
in the land of forgetfulness?

Here we have a description of those who appear to be less than
human, zombie-like, inert and unable to be in relationship with
others – essentially imprisoned in a shadowy twilight zone. Does it
sound familiar?

Yet contrary to the psalmist's assumption that God's wonders cannot
be known in gloom and obscurity we have this promise:

I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in
secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the
God of Israel, who call you by your name.

And we also have this intriguing observation in the first letter of
Peter:

He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in
which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in
prison,

The tradition that Christ descended to the depths to be alongside
those who have been forgotten by the world, have forgotten
themselves, who are lost and imprisoned, and that he brought
himself and his good news even to these folk in these places, offers
grounds for hope and rejoicing for us all. It is based on a collection
of straws in the wind that add up to make a persuasive case. The case
is ultimately persuasive because it fits with what we know about the
nature of God - the lengths to which he will go to seek and save the
lost. The mind of God in relation to individuals inhabiting twilight
zones is expressed in his pitching his tent among them:

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from
your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol,
you are there.

There is nowhere beyond the reach of God in Christ, and no state so low or ambiguous that it cannot be raised up by his transforming power.



Easter Sunday

John 20

1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.

2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb.

4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.

6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there,

7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.

8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed;

9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

10 Then the disciples returned to their homes.

11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb;

12 and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.

13 They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him

away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

16 Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher).

17 Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Alleluia Christ is risen

When I was a little girl of about 6 my Sunday school organised a Christmas party. It was held in an old and draughty church hall; we had orange squash in thick white china cups, squishy egg sandwiches, and iced buns. It wasn't it quite my cup of tea – I was rather superior and snobbish child. But I was sent along anyway. Nearly everybody else there turned out to be male, a bit older than me, and a lot noisier. We started with party games. They weren't very exciting and the prizes were only sweets. But then the Sunday school teacher in charge said that we were to have a treasure hunt and the prize would be a notebook and pen. That sounded good, so I paid attention.

The teacher told us that there was a postage stamp hidden somewhere in the hall and the person who found it would get the prize. We all started to look for it, guided by him saying 'hot' or 'cold'. Eventually he started to say 'hot – really hot, boiling!' to a group of boys gathered in one corner of the hall. They looked all around the area and then one of them said 'Well it's not here, let's look up on the stage.' And they all agreed. I couldn't believe my ears – their lack of logic beggared belief. Didn't they remember what the teacher had told them? I waited quietly until they had rushed off on their quest and then I sneaked over to the area where they'd been searching. Hidden discreetly behind a radiator was the postage stamp. With a smug smile on my face I went and got the teacher, showed him the stamp, and claimed my reward.

That incident from over 50 years ago came flooding back to me this week because I learnt a new wisdom saying from someone in this parish. I thought it was so good that I've already shared it with several people, and it goes like this: 'A thing isn't lost until a woman can't find it.'

This Holy Week we have been thinking about remembering – remembering the events of Jesus' Passion and being ourselves remembered in the process. Some years ago an eminent biblical scholar called Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza wrote a book about remembering entitled 'In memory of her'. The title refers to the woman who anointed Jesus at the beginning of his passion. The book itself argues that the female disciples were airbrushed out of the Gospel narratives by the male disciples – that the women we hear about are – to use her words – just the tip of the iceberg – the ones who managed to avoid the patriarchal airbrushing. It's a well argued book based on excellent scholarly research, but I think there is more to the story than that. I think we women can often collude with our own airbrushing because, just as I did at that party long ago, we tend to lurk in the background, operating unobtrusively and indirectly, making ourselves invisible. We generally prefer to exert influence rather than to wield power, to collaborate rather than to confront, to be back-stage rather than front-of-house. So we shouldn't rush to blame the Gospel writers for forgetting the female disciples. There were complex social and historical factors at work in their forgetting.

Yet one thing they couldn't forget, nor did they make any attempt to airbrush it out. This is the role of the women on the first Easter day. Each Gospel writer tells it a little bit differently but they all give women a central place in the story.

In the wonderful Gospel reading we have just heard, a woman comes to the tomb, finds the stone rolled away and assumes grave robbers have been at work. She runs and fetches two men. They come to the tomb, venture inside, and can't see the body anywhere; they forget what the teacher had told them and they go home.

But it seems that the woman has been lurking in the background all along and decides for whatever reason to have a good look herself. She gets her reward, for she sees two angels – a sign that something

heavenly is about to be revealed. And then Jesus – the teacher - appears. In a crucial detail we are told that she thinks he is the gardener. This is a garden. Adam and Eve took the fruit in a garden. Jesus allowed himself to be taken in a garden. But the most significant reference here is to the Song of Songs:

Where has your beloved gone, O fairest among women?
Which way has your beloved turned, that we may seek him
with you?
My beloved has gone down to his garden, to the beds of
spices, to pasture his flock in the gardens, and to gather lilies.

Upon my bed at night I sought him whom my soul loves; I
sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no
answer.

"I will rise now and go about the city, in the streets and in the
squares; I will seek him whom my soul loves." I sought him,
but found him not.

The sentinels found me, as they went about in the city. "Have
you seen him whom my soul loves?"

Scarcely had I passed them, when I found him whom my soul
loves. I held him, and would not let him go...

While Peter and the beloved disciple are as it were having a cup of
tea at home, Mary Magdalene has found Jesus. In line with that
piece of Witney wisdom it seems to have taken a woman.

But of course it didn't. Mary didn't find Jesus. He found her. When,
in her grief, she couldn't recognise him, he helped her, calling her by
name in an unmistakable tone. The risen Christ honoured women by
revealing himself to them first. He chose to reveal himself to women
for a reason - perhaps to demonstrate that the new order of the
kingdom of God had begun because those who were usually last
have now been put first. But the women, just like their male
brethren, didn't find Jesus. He found them: after all this is the One
who came to seek, to save, and to find the lost.

A repeated experience in the Christian life is that when we think we
are looking for God, it turns out that God has been looking for us,
and that when we are lost we don't have to find our own way home.

Remember Zacchaeus – he climbed into a tree because he wanted to see Jesus – but it was Jesus who looked up and saw him – and in that look of love remembered and saved him. Remember Saul of Tarsus – pursuing Jesus with hatred on the Road to Damascus, only to be found by Jesus and loved into a new way of life. Remember the prodigal Son – trying to get home on his own steam but met half way and brought home rejoicing by his dad who had, all the time been on the look-out for him. Remember Mary – desperately, passionately, looking for Jesus but found by Jesus.

And let's remember ourselves. The Christ who appeared to Mary and the other disciples is searching for us too, calling each of *us* by name, for he knows us through and through. He knows us and yet loves us; loves us so much that he went to the cross, through death, and out the other side to deal with those things that make us wonder if we are worth loving at all. For:

In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins

No one has greater love than this, than to lay down his life for his friends.

Father of all,
we give you thanks and praise,
that when we were still far off
you met us in your Son and brought us home.
Dying, living, and rising he declared your love,
gave us grace, and opened the gate of glory.
May we who share Christ's body live his risen life;
we who drink his cup bring life to others;
we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world.
Keep us firm in the hope you have set before us,
so we and all your children shall be free,
and the whole earth live to praise your name;
through Christ our Lord.

