

ENSURE THAT THE ALTAR CROSS IS VEILED

GOOD FRIDAY - Year C Responsibility: Canon Barlow

2nd April, 2010

Today is the one day in the year when we feel it inappropriate to have a service of Holy Communion - for that is a service of light and life. Today we commemorate the sad fact that men extinguished the light and life of the One who gave us that service. So our churches are stripped bare of decoration; our hymns are in a minor key; the very style of our service today is sad and mournful, as we try to express our regret and remorse.

Among other unusual aspects of our Good Friday worship is the use of three Collects, where normally only one is provided and used. They are of very ancient origin, although modernised for our ready understanding of them. We have to understand them if we are to pray them! Naturally enough, they are each concerned with the thought of the Redemption of mankind, although not so much about the means by which redemption was accomplished, as concerned with the scope of redemption.

The Readings appointed for Good Friday speak of the means of our redemption. Isaiah with remarkable foresight saw something of the suffering which the Saviour of mankind would have to undergo. "He was despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief ... he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities." (53:3 & 5). In the passage from St. John's Gospel we have set out for us the narrative and description of the actual events of the Saviour's ill-treatment, suffering, and death. Harrowing in its details, yet necessary if we are to really realize the extent of man's inhumanity even to the Saviour of mankind. And St Paul, in his first letter to the Christians of Corinth, proclaims the great mystery of God choosing to provide the means of the salvation of mankind through weakness and submission. "Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified -a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. But to those who are the called, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.' For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

But before we came to the Readings and heard the way our salvation, our redemption, was achieved, we prayed about the scope of its effect in those three special prayers, the Collects for Good Friday. We prayed first for the people of God as a whole: "look with mercy upon this your family." Then in the second Collect we prayed for each member of the family of God: "for all people in your holy Church". And the third prays for the many people outside the family who are still to be brought into it: "take from them all ignorance, hardness of heart, and contempt of your word; and so fetch them home".

There is a wonderful simplicity about the first Collect, and rather remarkable as the main Collect for Good Friday. It simply-asks God to take notice of His family, for which His Son was willing to be betrayed and given into the hands of sinners, and to suffer death upon the cross. At this most crucial time as we immerse ourselves in the great mystery of the world's redemption, we are called to pray for the most elementary thing: "look with mercy upon this your family". It is at moments of greatest importance, when we're faced with the ultimate issues of life and death, that all our sophistication, all the defensive armour we've built around ourselves through the years, drops away, and we are reduced to

that most elementary prayer: "Lord, have mercy on us." The use of the term "family" reminds us, that as well as knowing God as our Father, we are not alone as a child of God. We are part of the people of God, the Church, united in a common faith and trust that God will not leave His people to perish, but redeems and saves them from whatever result their sinfulness should bring.

This prayer also recognises those who killed Jesus were sinners, and we might think of these men as similar to ourselves, for we too have our jealousies, our selfishness, our anger. And we might be able to pray for them as Jesus did: "Father, forgive them", for we too need forgiveness. But right now we see them as sinners while we are the family whose big brother has been killed.

The second Collect assumes the identification of the "family" as being the Church; acknowledges the special work of the Holy Spirit in governing and sanctifying it; and prays for each person within it. "Receive our prayers ..., for all the people in your holy Church, that all its members, in their vocation and ministry, may truly and godly serve you."

It is commonly thought that only the clergy, and members of religious Orders have vocations and ministry in the Church! I assure you that every member of the Church has his or her particular part to play. The word "vocation" is from a Latin one meaning "to call", and each Christian person has been called by God to a ministry of worship and service. Some might appear more obvious than others; some more spectacular; some more costly - but individual men and women serving God make up the family of God, His Church. And to the extent that one member fails in answering the call of God, or is unfaithful, the whole Church suffers. The real significance of this second Collect lies in the recognition that salvation is not only corporate - "look with mercy upon this your family" - but also individual - "that all its members", each one of them, "may truly and godly serve you."

Both corporate and individual aspects receive recognition in the worship of the Church. Together in common worship we pray and give praise, receive blessing and absolution. Individually we are baptized and confirmed, and fed with the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ. So within the general ministry of the Church, preparing the way for the coming of the Kingdom, each one of us has a place to fill - a place to which we have been summoned by God, and in which we are to contribute to the worship and service of the whole. How important then, that none of us fail! We must each do our utmost to uphold each other, and ensure that in our case at least, Christ's sacrifice shall not have been made in vain.

The third Collect looks out beyond the confines of the family to those who are outside. God, who has created all mankind, wishes all to be saved. The redemption won by Christ is wide enough to embrace the whole of mankind. Indeed, the whole Universe. So also on this solemn day we pray that all who have not yet come within the sphere of His influence shall turn to Him, be converted, and live. The Prayer Book of 1662 was pretty blunt about this and specific: "*Have mercy upon all Jews, Turks, Infidels and Heretics.*" It was written of course to express the understanding and need of that period of history. Our more developed understanding of Christ's way with people has brought a much more loving attitude: "Have mercy on all who have not known you, or who deny the faith of Christ crucified." Today the Christian Church is much more ready to recognise the sincerity of non-Christian religions, and to see in them at least partial expressions of the truth as it has been revealed to us. The reasons why people do

not believe, or who deny, either as religious groups or as individuals, are set out in this Collect: We pray that these things will be corrected, and that those who have never known Christ – or who have turned away from Him, will be brought home to the fold of the Good Shepherd, to be part of one flock.

Nevertheless, we are specially bound on this day to remember the difference that Christ has made. This is GOOD Friday, because by His self-sacrifice Jesus opened the way to the Father - a way closed previously because of the sinfulness of the human race. We pray that all mankind - the Church, the individuals within that family, those unknowing and unwilling - may take advantage of the opened way and draw near to their Heavenly Father.

The cross above the altar is veiled today. We cannot help knowing that under the veil is a cross without the figure of a man upon it. The crucifixion is only part of the story. Jesus Christ was killed. But death could not hold Him: "On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures". And resurrection from the dead provided the vindication and the proof of all that Jesus claimed. That victory we will joyfully celebrate on Easter Day.

AMEN

‘By His death on the cross, He offered the one true sacrifice for sin, and obtained an eternal deliverance for His people. And now we give thanks that You raised Him to life triumphant, and exalted Him in glory.’ You will hear these words again in the introduction to the Eucharistic Prayer of Thanksgiving, Nice words. Highfalutin words. But how can we be sure of their truth? Is it adequate to say ‘they are in the Bible?’

Let us go back to Good Friday night, and see the eleven disciples in the depths of despair, with nothing to hope for, and nothing to believe in. They had trusted Jesus and the promise of the Kingdom. But Jesus had been killed, and the hope of the Kingdom had died with Him. And wasn’t there a lurking suspicion that they had failed to stand up for Him? To defend Him? Was the real problem that mankind was not good enough to merit the Kingdom?

Then there was Peter. More than the others, he had failed, because he had promised so vehemently that he wouldn’t fail. He had failed before, but then the Lord has forgiven him and re-instated him. Now Jesus was dead. – there could be no forgiveness.

Mary was doubly distressed. She had lost her son in a horrible death. But more than that: she had believed that His birth and whole life were special acts of God, and that she had been given a special part to play in all that. And the plan had failed. The expectation was only a dream, it was all wasted.

No doubt the other Mary, from Magdala, had the same sort of feeling. Jesus had seen her need, offered her forgiveness, and a whole new way of life. Now He was dead. An empty future lay before her. Finally, let us remember that the two people, trudging home gloomily to Emmaus, . (Cleopas and friend.) ‘We had hoped that He would redeem Israel.’ ‘*We had hoped ...*’ There is the wistful longing of folk who are used to seeing the wrong people in power, and the wrong people getting the rewards.

And then came Easter morning, and for all of them. Life was transformed! The Lord was alive! Fantastic! Unbelievable! The Apostles realised that, despite the self-seeking scheming of the Establishment, and their own weakness, the Kingdom could still come, and they would be allowed to work for it and be part of it.

What a joy for Peter. He could again see his Lord, and ask for pardon and another chance. The Marys too, what a change for them. Mary the mother found that her son’s life hadn’t been wasted, nor hers either. And Mary of Magdala found that death hadn’t removed the one she loved; their relationship had been changed, not ended. And Cleopas and friend - they could still hope. They had seen the power of God overcome the sin and weakness of men. Their hope had a new dimension.

How did God do it? I don’t know - nor do I know how God became man in the first place either. But He did and I am quite sure about that, as I am about the resurrection. But what a low-key event it was! There was no triumphalism, no reproofs, no “now will you believe me”.

Have you ever imagined how .a good PR man might have handled it? Imagine that sudden emotional appearance interrupting a despondent speech at a mass-meeting of disciples. A dramatic face-to-face encounter with Annas and Caiaphas. A dignified “heads of state” meeting with Pontius

Pilate. A carefully--arranged informal drop-in at the military barracks to tell the soldiers it was all O.K., He understood that they had only been following orders. In other words, how we would like our little triumphs to be handled. But no, the resurrection was known only to those who had, in a manner of speaking, died with the Lord first. And this is still the case.

How do we know? How can we be sure? By seeing the resurrection not just in the appearance of Jesus Himself, but in the lives of His followers. The apostles "lived" the resurrection as they accepted from the Holy Spirit the courage and the perseverance to go on proclaiming Jesus as Lord. As churchwardens and lay assistants and members of the Mothers' Union and Sunday School teachers and ordinary inhabitants of the pews have from that day to this - ordinary people doing God's work with His help for His purposes.

Peter "lived" the resurrection as he found forgiveness and a new start, as millions of followers of the Lord have rejoiced in the gift of forgiveness, over and over again, as they have gone on trying to respond to His call, dying with the Lord in their repentance and going on to the joy of a new beginning. And like the Marys, countless Christians who have responded to the Lord's call to worship and service, and have gone on in success and failure trying to respond to His call, and in His strength.

Think too of all the bereaved people who have known that they have a special relationship with their loved ones in His resurrection. Then there are all the ordinary everyday people who live decent lives, and hope for a better life for their children – all down the ages, myriads have believed that because of Jesus and His resurrection, it is worth while to go on working and hoping and believing.

No, this is NOT proof. This is faith, based, not on wishful thinking, but on the observable effect on the lives of those who go on in trust. I find assurance in the knowledge that the resurrection is real and effective for all, including myself, who like the first disciples, are willing to go through our Good Fridays in the expectation of the joy of that first Easter Day.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

"Jesus said to Thomas: Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (John 20:29)

As the years of life slip by we find ourselves wondering more and more about the question of life after death. When bereavement strikes us, we want to know whether it is the end, or whether the relationship will be restored in some new realm of existence. Many people dodge the issue altogether, as after a nightmare you deliberately turn your thoughts to something else. Others turn to spiritualism for an answer, and indeed those who have undertaken psychical research present a great deal of evidence for the probability of life after death. But they have little to say about the nature of the next life, or of its relationship with this one. And after all, is mere survival in itself desirable? To be extinguished like a candle when we die may be a depressing and dismal thought, but to some the idea of surviving indefinitely with those of whom they have already seen too much, is even more dismal and depressing. The message of Easter takes us further than psychical speculation, tells us more of the nature of the next life, and of its purpose.

In each of the three Creeds printed in our Prayer Books, there is an attempt to express belief and understanding of this puzzle. Each Creed differs slightly from the others, and each throws light from a different angle. In the Nicene Creed, used in the service of Holy Communion, we say: "We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come." In the Apostles' Creed, used in Morning and Evening Prayer, and Holy Baptism, we say we believe in "the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." The third Creed is the Athanasian Creed, which is rarely used in services but which is a tremendous declaration of faith, and the relevant part there says: "At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies, and shall give account for their own works." Incidentally, if you want to check out the Athanasian Creed, and it is worth doing, it is on pages 487 and 488 of the green short version of the new Prayer Book, and pages 836 and 837 of the full version. We really need to look at each of these attempts to define the inexplicable.

There was a difference between traditional Greek thought and Hebrew thought with regard to life after death. The Greeks saw body and soul as two different entities, the body being a kind of prison house of the soul. Hebrew thought saw human personality as one animated body breathed upon by the animating Spirit of God. So whereas the Greeks believed in a continuance of a sort of invisible soul-stuff, the Hebrews thought of the rising again of the whole personality, expressing itself through some kind of body. When we say "I believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come", we nail our colours to the mast and make it plain that we believe that the grave is not the end. That there is some sort of existence beyond this one, some sort of general resurrection.

The Apostles' Creed is more precise. "I believe in the resurrection of the body". By putting it that way, we avoid the belief held by some that what will happen will be a general resurrection of human life which will be absorbed into the life of the Creator like rain drops into the sea, but rather that we believe in an individual resurrection, so that the personality can be found beyond the grave expressing itself through a body in much the same way as it does on this side of the grave. I will survive as I; you will

survive as you; and each of us will maintain a spirit-body relationship in much the same way as we do now. The nature of our bodies certainly will differ from what they are now, but we shall have bodies of some sort and they will be distinct entities.

The Athanasian Creed is even more specific, stating it seems at first glance, belief in the resurrection of the fleshly body. But it does not mean that the actual particles of the flesh rise again from corruption, but that personality on the other side of the grave is continuous with the personality on this side. It is likely that our thoughts, actions, and imaginings during this life play a large part in forming a personality which will go with us into the next life. Understood in this way, worries about the destruction of bodies by cremation or explosion may be relieved.

The reason lying behind all these attempts to express belief in resurrection and life after death, is not due to speculation and wishful thinking. These are three ways of expressing belief that because Christ conquered death, we too may have eternal life. The women on Easter morning found the tomb open and empty. For a while the discovery led them to suppose that someone had stolen the body. When John and Peter arrived and saw the empty tomb and the burial wrappings lying there, they grasped the truth – there was a future life, and Jesus had entered victoriously into it.

When Mary Magdalene saw the Risen Lord, she mistook Him for the gardener. He was real enough for that. He had not merely risen, but He remained a person, still capable of personal relationships.

And what about the flesh - the continuity between our present bodies and our resurrection bodies? That was Thomas's problem: "Except I shall see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into His side, I will not believe." Eight days later he was offered the proof: "Thomas, reach hither thy finger" Thomas answered: "My Lord and my God." Just exactly what was the connection between the earthly body of Jesus and His spiritual body, we cannot really know. In our own case we discard the earthly body, which decays and turns into the elements of which everything on this earth is made, and we continue on in a spiritual body. But perhaps in the case of Jesus His earthly body was changed into a spiritual or glorified body, as seems to have happened before, at the Transfiguration. Being who He is, a reverse process is possible, and during those 40 days after Easter He was able to re-assume His earthly body in which His friends could recognise Him.

So in the experience of Easter, Peter and John grasped the truth of a general resurrection, of a new realm of existence. Mary discovered that in this new realm of existence persons remained persons. Thomas was compelled to recognise the continuity between the Jesus he had seen die on the cross, and the Jesus who met him behind closed doors in an upper room nine days later.

That is the glorious message of Easter. Death is not the end. **This mortal life does not constitute the sum total of** our experience. There is another realm of existence awaiting us, and when we reach it we shall reach it as a person with our own personality. Christ confronts each one of us and says: "I am the living one; I died and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades." If we accept His promises and believe in Him and surrender ourselves to Him, we shall find

ourselves in that sphere of activity which we call eternal life when our span of earthly time runs out. Not only will death lose its sting, because it will be seen to be a comparatively unimportant incident in a large experience, but we shall find as did Peter, John, Mary and Thomas, a new reason for living, a goal at which to aim, a Master to serve, and a Kingdom to win. **AMEN**

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

In chapter 5 of the Acts of the Apostles, it is recorded that Peter and some other apostles had been taken before the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish court, and ordered not to teach or even speak in the name of Jesus. They replied: "We must obey God rather than any human authority, for we are witnesses to these things." (Acts 5:29,32)

The apostles were chosen above all else to be witnesses to the resurrection. Their teaching was centred on the Cross and the Resurrection. As St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain." (1 Cor.15:14) Worse still, God would be misrepresented.

If the Resurrection is at the centre of the Church's teaching, and if the Church is to carry on the work of the Apostles faithfully, as witness to the fact of the resurrection, then we ought to know something more than just the plain historical fact. We ought to know what was implied by the fact of the Resurrection.

There are three main lines of thought to be traced in Holy Scripture. **Firstly**, it is regarded as the Divine reversal of the faulty judgement of men and as vindicating the Messiahship claimed by Jesus. The thought of a crucified Messiah was to the Jew a contradiction of terms. Crucifixion was taken to be a sign of God's utter rejection, and any crucified person was accursed of God. The Resurrection was proclaimed as proving that old idea false. To the believer it was the fulfillment of our Lord's own prediction about Himself, thus-proving His claims to be true, and assigning to Him full Messianic authority.

Secondly, the Scriptures see the Resurrection as certifying our Lord's death as redemptive, as redeeming or rescuing mankind from the power of sin and evil, something humanity could not do for itself. The Apostles were able to show from the Old Testament, the Scriptures of the Jews, how the Messiah had to suffer and die, and that it had been foretold by the Prophets. His rising from death marked the acceptance by God of a sacrifice made on behalf of all mankind. The Resurrection is the proclamation and the confirmation of the victory of our Lord's atoning death.

And **thirdly**, the Resurrection of Christ is regarded as a pledge of the resurrection of Christians. To quote St .Paul again and this time writing to the Thessalonians: "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him." (1 Thess.4:14) Not only do Christians receive here and now new life, as sharing the life of the Risen Christ, but from the first, the Resurrection has been proclaimed as the assurance of resurrection from death for us.

Three main ideas: a vindication or proof of Messiahship; a certification of victory over sin, evil and death; and a pledge of our own resurrection. But can we be sure of this teaching? Can we count on the truth of the story? After all, the records do vary, and if it did happen, it was a very long time ago. Without going into much detail, here are some of the lines of evidence upon which we base our faith. You've probably heard them before, but to remind you. There is something of a problem in the variations in the Gospel accounts of the events on the first Easter Day. But oddly enough this is a good thing, because it speaks against any conspiracy among the four recorders - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and speaks

for the honesty of the witnesses, who were prepared to stick by what they experienced and believed happened. Any judge would be suspicious of accounts which corresponded too closely. After His death, Jesus appeared to many different people in variety of situations And not only to individuals, but to groups of various numbers. To the to women at the sepulchre; to Mary Magdalene, to the ten disciples in the Upper room, and a week later to the same group with the addition of Thomas; to the disciples at the Sea of Galilee as we heard in today's Gospel; to the eleven on a mountain in Galilee; to 500 of the brethren at once; to James; and later on, to Paul. This is a very large number of people to accuse of having hallucinations, or of conspiracy - the only alternatives. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians about the resurrection, he said that many of those witnesses were alive at the time of writing, implying that they could contradict him if he was lying. The young Church was quite united and convinced in its witness to the Risen Christ.

The next problem is: where was the body of Jesus? There is no doubt that the tomb was empty on the morning of the third day: everybody seems to be in agreement with that. Even the authorities, according to the account in St. Matthew's Gospel about the bribing of the sentries to keep them silent (Matt.28:11-15).

If the Jewish authorities had taken the body, why did they not produce it when the stories of the Resurrection began to circulate? And certainly, if the Christians themselves had taken it to fake a resurrection story, their subsequent actions would have been vastly different. None of them would have been prepared to die - and some died horribly - for the sake of a fable. A religion based on a_lie would never have lasted throughout the persecutions of those early years, and since.

And another thing. How can we explain away the amazing change of attitude in the disciples in such a short period? Something happened to turn the weak timid disciples of Good Friday into the dauntless, courageous leaders of the Church that we read of in the Acts of the Apostles: They-themselves ascribed their transformation to the power of the Resurrection. The Christian character which entered the world at that time was something new. It was revolutionary, and it startled Jew and Gentile alike by its humility and its joyfulness; by its new standard of values and its re-interpretation of human existence. The contrast between Christian and non-Christian behaviour and outlook is quite considerable. And Christians have through all ages pointed to the Risen Christ and His sending of the Holy Spirit as the source of all their strength.

The major task of the Church Militant, the Church upon earth is to carry on the work of witness. It is so easy and comfortable to say: "The Church must do this" or "The Church ought to do that." WE are the Church! We declare it Sunday by Sunday: "We are the Body of Christ". When we say: "Why doesn't the Church do such and such", we are really saying: "Why don't we do that?" For the Church is the faithful people of God who meet to worship Him and who seek to do His will.

But how are we to know what the will of God is? We are to open our hearts and our minds to Him; to make ourselves available to Him, by prayer, by reading Holy Scripture, by receiving His Sacraments. Then we will soon come to know where and how we can serve Him. He will put into our minds good desires and aspirations, and circumstances will happen to point us in the direction He would have us go.

We may read and study all about the person of Jesus, but still only know about Him. To know Him is to have Him in our heart; to receive Him into our very inmost being. Regular and frequent reception of the Holy Communion is the means instituted by Christ Himself whereby we open ourselves to Him and receive Him, His power, the power of the Holy Spirit, into our lives.. It is not the only way of course, for we dare not suggest a limit to the power of God. But Jesus said: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him" (Jn.6:56). As-we receive the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of the Risen Christ, we receive Him, and thus are enabled to fulfill our part in His Church as witnesses to the fact that God has indeed raised from the dead this Jesus, who gave Himself for us and for our salvation.

AMEN

No material is available for The Fourth Sunday of Easter.