

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

2 April, 2006

1. **We have some big issues in the Church today**—the consecration of women bishops and the ordination of homosexuals are the two major ones. In the early Church a major issue was the place of Gentiles in the Church because many Jews still regarded Gentiles as ‘unclean’ and outside the realm of God’s care.
2. **John 12. 20-33 shows some Gentile Jews** anxious to meet Jesus. Jesus’ answer to a simple request for the Greeks to approach him was met with a theological answer. Jesus speaks of his Passion and his glorification and foresees the power of the Cross to draw all people to him.
3. **The Father honours whoever serves Christ.** John contrasts the interest of the Gentiles with the obduracy of the Jews. The voice from heaven was for the sake of the Jewish crowd who persistently failed to recognize Jesus and understand his calling. The early Jewish Christians had trouble accepting Gentile Christians yet many of them had responded to Jesus so readily.
4. **This passage where Jesus speaks about his death** gives Jesus’ explanation of why he had to die. He uses the analogy of the dying of a grain of wheat so that more wheat can flourish. So his death will be the means by which sin and evil will be overcome. And all people, sins forgiven, can come close to him. Hebrews 5.5-14 reinforces “ he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him”
5. **The early Jews struggled with Gentiles becoming Christians** because they had such exclusivist views about purity. At various times people have struggled with inclusion of people of different races in the Church. The place of women in the Church has been a source of debate and still is, and now also we have debates over the inclusion of homosexual people. Jesus’ own words and the New Testament are very clear: all who follow Jesus, all who obey (i.e. listen and respond), all who serve Jesus, will be with him and will be honoured by the Father. Jesus is that grain of wheat, the one perfect sacrifice, through whose death all people may be drawn to him and know his glory.

SUNDAY OF THE PASSION (PALM SUNDAY)

9 April, 2006

1. You may remember Uriah Heep, **a weak oily character in David Copperfield**, whose false humility masked his villainy. His protestations about being "umble" bring feelings of loathing for the man and do nothing for our understanding of humility. Perhaps we need to look to more recent models of humility to see that it is a strong human characteristic which exerts its own power. Nelson Mandela, who endured imprisonment for a just cause for decades, humbly submitting to the authorities and then on release working for good and not vindication; Mother Theresa humbly living a life among the poor in order to assist them; Gandhi, living a humble life yet providing nation-changing leadership.
2. **But the prime example is Jesus himself** who became a man to be the slave and servant of all. He humbled himself—God became man. He emptied himself of his kingship and high status to become an 'infant lowly', and as a human he became totally obedient., even to death on a cross. This Phil. 2.5-11 passage includes a very early Christian hymn which celebrates Christ's humility as a model for us all.
3. **The Old Testament had prefigured Christ** with an image of 'a suffering servant'. Isaiah 50.4-9a speaks of a humble character who silently bore torture and insult, one whose humility will be vindicated by God. Only Jesus understood that the path of glory encompassed suffering, insult and death, and so humbly faced what was before him.
4. **The small part of the letter to the Philippians** in the lectionary enjoins us to be like Christ in our humility—this paradox of humility leading to exaltation. From the Gospel today (Mark 14.1-15.27) we see the woman who anointed Jesus. V.9 reminds us how her humble recognition of the kingship of Christ and the greatness of his sacrifice will be remembered always.
5. **How can we imitate the humility of Christ?:** like the woman humility requires that we acknowledge Jesus as Lord, to face the facts of our own weakness and failures, to acknowledge our dependence on God for our creation, forgiveness, and preservation, and to do him homage. Secondly it calls us to be like him a slave and a servant for others, loving our neighbours as ourselves and serving them sacrificially.

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

30 April, 2006

1. **“They were startled and terrified** and thought they were seeing a ghost...in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering” (Luke 24.36b-48) What mixed emotions the disciples had on the shore of Lake Tiberias that Sunday morning! The gospel writer captures well what a turmoil the disciples were in when they could not believe their own experience, their own eyes, their own ears.
2. **So Jesus had to tell them again** what he'd told them before, going through the writings of the Law and the Prophets and the Psalms, teaching about all those things which had pointed to his coming, giving an explanation of his death and resurrection for the forgiveness of the sins of the world, and the need for the gospel to be spread across the world.
3. **Experience, reason (sound teaching) and tradition**—these three are in this narrative thus giving us some insight into the nature of Christian experience. Jesus had taught and taught his disciples. He had taken them apart from others for special teaching yet throughout the gospels we see time and time again where they failed to understand or remember what he had taught them (e.g. Thomas, Peter, James and John all have stories where they have not understood his teaching or actions). And even now he had risen from death, further explanation was given. They needed to reflect on their experience in the light of the scriptural tradition and the sound teaching of Jesus.
4. **Experience, reason and tradition** are sometimes called the ‘three-legged stool’ of Anglicanism. Not tradition alone, not experience alone, not reason alone, but all three combine to inform our faith, stir our hearts, and make sense.
5. **What does this tell us about our growth in faith?** How in worship do people in this church experience the touch of the holy, and hear the voice of Jesus? Do we hear of their experience of Christ in their daily lives? What opportunities do we give people to reflect on their experience in the light of our tradition? What sound teaching do we offer so that people can make sense of what they have experienced? We are witnesses too and like the disciples will gain confidence to proclaim his name abroad.

GOOD FRIDAY

14 April, 2006

1. **Why did Jesus have to die?** There is a simple answer. Jesus died because he preached radical ideas which threatened the political and religious leaders of Jerusalem. He exposed their hypocrisy, offered an alternative view to the current interpretation of the Law, and was popular, arousing fear and jealousy. So he was condemned to die. But that answer is based on Jesus' humanity. If that had been the case then Jesus would have died and been buried and the furor would have died down and we would no longer remember him.
2. **The answer is to be found in both Jesus' humanity and his divinity.** Paul wrote that Jesus' death and resurrection (for we cannot separate the two) was foolishness to the Greeks and a stumbling block for the Jews (1 Cor. 1.18-31). To modern rational human beings it can be incomprehensible too. We understand it only through the eyes of faith.
3. **Some understanding of the nature of sacrifice** in Temple worship illuminates the crucifixion. From ancient times the Jews made sacrifices and the concept of sacrifice is found in other religions too. Sacrifice is the offering of an animal, vegetable or food/drink to God to restore a right relationship with God and on occasion to initiate a new relationship. Yet the death of Jesus, is not just another sacrifice. It is “the one perfect and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world”. It is unique in that Jesus was a voluntary victim, of infinite value, and he himself was the Priest making the offering.
4. **Jesus understood himself in terms of the Suffering Servant** pictured in Isaiah's poetry. (Isaiah 52.13-53.12) where he is spoken of as sacrifice “his life was made an offering for sin”, and “by his bruises we are healed”.
5. **And what is our response?** Isaac Watts words in *When I survey the wondrous cross* AHB 258 are eloquent in expressing the believer's response. Intuitively we understand that only the Man-God, the one who was human and divine, could be the perfect sacrifice to restore humanity's relationship with God.

EASTER DAY
16 April, 2006

1. **It seems that the Corinthian Christians were beginning to doubt the possibility of resurrection.** 1 Cor. 15.1-11 is part of Paul's response to them and in it he also has left for us the earliest documentary evidence of those who were witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus.
2. **He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve** (and we can add "to Mary Magdalene). It is interesting today that John 20.1-10 tells only the story of the empty tomb. They saw and believed even though they did not understand the scriptures at that stage and they did not actually 'see' him until later that day.
3. **And then, Last of all...he appeared to me.** Paul counted his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road, where he was blinded with light and heard a voice. as a sighting. Whatever happened, Paul did a complete turn around, questioned what he was doing as he persecuted Christians, and believed in the risen Lord.
4. **Could we add our own names to that list of those who have had an encounter with the risen Lord?** Maybe we have not seen with our eyes, or seen blinding lights, or touched with our hands but have we had encounters with the risen Lord. Are there times when the risen Lord has been close to you? Have you felt his presence during times of trouble or of peace, do you hear his voice speaking to you in prayer, do you hear him asking something of you, or calming your fears, have you met him through someone else who was Christ-like to you? How has he turned you completely around?
5. **Think about why you believe:** early Jewish Christians possibly became convinced of the scriptural evidence but more importantly they believed because of the witness of those who spoke of their own encounters with the risen Lord. We can bring others to faith, not just because of our understanding of the Old Testament scriptures, not just because we believe Paul and the gospel writers, but most of all because of our witness to Christ in our own lives and our own experience of the risen Lord.

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER
23 April, 2006

1. **Thomas is a complex character.** Thomas wanted to go to die with Jesus at Bethany when he faced opposition for the healing of Lazarus; yet later he said he didn't know the way to the Father! And now today in John 20.19-31 we hear him doubting the resurrection of Jesus because he didn't believe the other disciples. He demanded verification. When he did believe, his response was to fall down in worship. His life was changed.
2. **Some Christians are very fond of telling their stories of conversion.** Some of the more dramatic tell of lives of crime, drugs, alcohol, violence as BEFORE stories and then of the state of difference in the AFTER stories. People baptized as babies, brought up in the Church and who feel that they have always been believers may either reject such stories as sensational, or envy the one who can see what a clear difference Christ has made in their lives. No matter when and how we came to faith, how we hear him, how we feel his touch, our lives should be a reflection to those looking on, of the presence of Christ with us in Spirit. Like the apostles, those of us who have heard and seen and touched the risen Lord need to walk in the light. (1 John 1.1-2.2)
3. **Acts 4.32-37 is presented to us as a model Christian community.** Filled with the Holy Spirit, the group lived in harmony; sharing their possessions. Barnabas is presented as a model of generosity in giving to the group the total profit of his property sale. As ideal as the picture sounds, unfortunately it was not true of the whole church for in the next chapter of Acts we find Ananias and Sapphira selling property and keeping back some of the proceeds for themselves. Not such a happy family after all!
4. **Yet we can take the ideal community as a model:** 'one heart and soul', 'holding things in common', 'powerful witnesses of the resurrection', 'grace was upon them', 'no-one needy among them', generous and not keeping back for themselves.
5. **Examine your congregation against several of these criteria:** how well do we strive for unity based on the mind of Christ; how well do we witness to the power of the resurrection in our lives, to the voice and touch of Jesus, so that we let God make things new, how generous are we for the things of God or do we keep too much back for ourselves?