

Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 31st March, Easter Day

Readings: Isaiah 25:6-9
Acts 10:34-43

Psalms 118:1-2, 14-24
John 20:1-18

Many of you would know that I have a passion for Welsh hymns, so not surprisingly this weekend I'm hearing the melody of '*I will sing the wondrous story*', a hymn written by Rowland Huw Prichard! For those unfamiliar with the hymn, the first verse begins: '*I will sing the wondrous story of the Christ who died for me, how he left the realms of glory for the cross on Calvary...*' It is an anthem that affirms the difference that faith in Christ makes, for us in this life and in the life to come... But, surely, the 'wondrous story' has implications that are greater than individual salvation.

In many ways the week preceding Easter Sunday is the most intensive time of storytelling for mainline Christian churches around the world, and these stories are often reinforced with symbols and activities that are used at no other time of the year. On Palm Sunday churches are often decorated with palm branches and there can be a procession in and around the church. At some stage in that service skillfully made palm crosses are blessed and distributed, and people may be invited to participate in a two service weekday services.

On Maundy Thursday people can be invited to wash the feet of another person and allow their own feet to be washed. In that liturgy people are reminded that the sacrament of communion comes from the last meal Jesus shared with his friends in which he asked them to remember him whenever they broke bread and shared a cup of wine together. People can also be reminded that the last command of Jesus to his disciples night was that they love one another. Finally, people are reminded of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane.

On Good Friday people are reminded that there was a kiss of betrayal from Judas; words of denial from Peter; and false charges made. These days they might be termed 'fake news' or, 'alternative facts'! Then, a compromised cross-examination; a fickle crowd demanding death; and a crown of thorns before a criminal's execution. As Jesus was dying there are remembered words indicating desolation, together with the sense that whatever he had been tasked with was finished. Then a hasty burial, and fear among his followers about what might happen next.

Today we remember, unexpectedly and unimaginably, an empty tomb, and a life-changing encounter. Resurrection and relief! New life, and joy! Together, with the request to tell others about what had happened.

It is a wondrous story, and for most of us very familiar. However, I am glad that we have an opportunity to remember this story each year, and reflect deeply on what it means for us as individuals, as a community of faith, and for the world in which we live. No matter how familiar the story, it meets us where we are, and in God's grace we can always learn new things from it.

Things have happened in your life and mine, and in the life of the world, since we last celebrated Easter – some significant and some less so. I invite you to consider what elements of the story particularly strike you this year? What people in the story do you most identify with? What do you find most confronting, and why do you think this is?

Do you, or I, most resonate with Judas betraying his leader; Peter denying his friend; or, Mary weeping at the foot of the cross? Do you, or I, recognise in the gullibility of the crowd our own willingness to simply go along with injustice, and not question or challenge? Do you, or I, recognise in the self-interest of the religious and secular authorities our own self-interest, or indifference? And, are you, or I, confronted by the generous prayer of Jesus for his persecutors even as he was dying, *'Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do...'*?

I wonder what Barabbas thought when Pilate released him from prison, instead of Jesus? I wonder if he was bold and mocking like one of the crucified thieves, or did he, like the other thief, recognise his own unworthiness? And, I wonder what Barabbas did with that unexpected, and undeserved, gift of a second chance at life? I wonder how we respond, and what we do, when we feel unworthy of God's love and gift of life... even when these things are freely given?

I feel a bit like Barabbas this year – unbelievably fortunate to share my life with people I love, to live in a politically stable country, and have all the resources available that can help me to flourish. To have all these things in a world where so many people are separated from those they love because of war, and famine. A world in which, for many, there is little or no access to education and health care, and even survival is a challenge. Did Barabbas feel thankful and want to give back

somehow, or did he feel entitled and unconcerned about the one who'd taken his place?

Do you, or I, feel grateful and want to give back somehow, or do we feel entitled and unmoved by those who suffer - simply because they were born into a situation different to our own?

Considering the decision of Mary Magdalene to go to the tomb early in the morning may be helpful. In her grief about what had happened Mary could have chosen not to go to the tomb to grieve. In her fear about what might happen to those who had been the followers of Jesus she might have hidden herself away, or left Jerusalem afraid for her life. Yet Mary chose not to be overwhelmed by grief or fear and instead went to the tomb, to find it empty. It was Mary who went to tell Peter and John, and Mary who stayed at the tomb weeping after they left.

As she wept, Jesus came to her, and she did not recognise him. There is something important in this for us: a recognition that new life, in this life and the next, looks different to what has been before. Mary did not recognise Jesus... until he called her by name.

What do we bring to the cross, and the empty tomb this year? In the midst of our grieving, and struggles, can we recognise the presence of Christ with us? Can we hear him call us by name?

Jesus was not content for Mary to simply sit with him relieved and joyful – he had work for her to do, and she went to do this with joy and new purpose. I think similarly for us the risen Christ does not want us to simply sit joyfully with him, he wants us to love and use our little gifts and abilities to make a difference for good in the world.

The Lord is risen! Alleluia!
He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Life-giving God, we give thanks for the resurrection of Christ, and for the joy of knowing your love. Renew within us a sense of wonder and purpose at the gift of our lives, and through your Spirit guide us in the journeys we travel. We pray in the name of the One who is risen, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.