

Easter

The week

2008

INTRODUCTION

Easter week is a bridge too many wash away. Palm Sunday is on one bank, Easter Sunday the other. Sadly, the worldly detour round chocolate, chicks and bunny rabbits is too often preferred to the more demanding and risky religious crossing. Easter needs the “week link” to make the connection and resurrect a true appreciation of all that has been done for our sakes.

Without the content of the sorrow, the depth of the joy is hard to gauge. Without the last supper and the betrayal and the arrest and the flogging and the crucifying, Easter Sunday becomes an egg-rolling, chocolate-layered reason for rejoicing that pays no heed to why it is a source of hope for us.

Take the bridge! There is no toll! Risk the crossing! We can do no other, if we are to shadow the steps of the Christ in this week.

***‘Holy week’
the name we use
as if to sanitise the shame
of deep disdain,
by calling it a worthy name:
the noblest we could choose.***

***‘Holy week’
a ritual time
in measured steps of liturgy
of “We urge thee...”
in prayers from earnest clergy
in careful, crafted rhyme.***

***‘Holy week’
a watershed
where love comes face to face with fear
and hate is near
and how we turn to sin is clear
and yet for us Christ bled.***

PALM SUNDAY***Palms and Psalms***

Matthew 21.1-11

As a child, I thought it interesting that there seemed to be a Sunday set aside for a part of my anatomy. Then I realised that it was about palm branches waving and was disappointed. And then I realised that it really *was* about the palms of hands after all: the open palms of the welcoming crowd in stark contrast to the closed fists of the “Crucify!”-crying crowd; the opened palms of the welcoming Jesus nailed to the gallows wood. And on the other hand, so to speak, it is about our palms opened up in vulnerable service. This Sunday is about palms and it is about psalms. This is no poetic punning. Palm Sunday had the people singing songs of celebration and shouting words of acclamation. Psalms were the people’s soundtrack. Psalms will have sounded as the donkey bore its load towards Jerusalem to joyous acclamation with the killing hill beyond.

MONDAY***Perfume and Pique***

John 12.1-11

It seems that the 30 pieces of silver was not Judas’ only financial crime. He sold not only Jesus but the poor. This pique about the perfume not being used as a fundraiser but instead lavished on the feet of Jesus is not all it seems. Judas, according to John, was not unused to dipping his hand in the common purse. Or is this giving the dog an even worse name in retrospect? Either way, there are points to ponder. Whether for personal gain or not, Judas’ plea for the poor, taken at face value, presents a challenge. Perfume-makers would, of course, plead on behalf of their own jobs. Austere living by the rich is not the gift to the poor it might seem to be. Profligate living is never defensible but generous gifts need sometimes to be graciously received: for the sake of the makers, for the sake of the givers and for the sake of the sign the giving gives of care and devotion.

TUESDAY***Lingering Light***

John 12.20-36

Solar panels may be the world's salvation for energy needs. The sun shines, the energy is excited in the panels, electricity flows. But when the light goes and darkness comes, the flow ceases. Batteries are needed to store the energy so that, even when the sun is down, still the sun's energy gives power. Is this that different from Jesus' plea to his people prior to his Cross? As light, Jesus energises the people. And they presume he will be with them always – like a sun that never goes down. But this Son will go down, at the hands of even some of these he addresses here. And the people, were they denied the direct light of Christ for ever, would run dry of faith: their spiritual batteries empty. Unless, of course, they became light sources themselves. Solar panels may be the world's salvation for energy needs. "Solar pilgrims" can supply its spiritual needs.

WEDNESDAY *True to Treachery*

John 13.21-32

Judas departed from the meal in the Upper Room but didn't depart from his role. Curiously, in betraying he was faithful. After all, it was expected. It was part of the plot. While the other disciples continued to struggle to grasp all that Jesus said and did, Judas played a different game. Obviously trusted by the others (he was treasurer, it ironically seems) he was also trusted by Jesus. Judas did not let him down. He played his part to perfection: betrayed flawlessly and became, in the process, the focus of righteous indignation – a scapegoat to deflect attention from the shortcomings of others. Was a kiss in the garden any worse than a three-times denial in a courtyard? Yet Peter is feted and Judas is ostracized. As Shakespeare might have written for any who delight in condemning Judas as faithless and wicked, "Methinks that person protesteth too much!"

THURSDAY *Feet and Faith*

John 13.1-7, 31b-35

John's Last Supper is about ablutions not libations, about bathing, not bread. The feet always displayed the dust of everyday living. In the days long before tarmacadam, kicking up some dust was virtually unavoidable. Is Jesus, then, washing the world from the disciples? Is he cleansing them of the stain the world gives? Nothing quite so heavy handed. Jesus is teaching through open-toed sandals. Dealing with dirty feet leading to deeper faith, if the lesson is learned and the example followed. The hospitable act becomes something far deeper: a willingness and readiness not just to talk about serving, but getting the towel on, hefting feet into your lap and washing. A watershed moment, perhaps!

GOOD FRIDAY *Forsaken and Forlorn*

John 18.1-19.42

Humiliation seems complete: forsaken by God; deserted by friends; mocked by many. Good we call this Friday! Grim or Grisly more like. A massive miscarriage of justice. The guilty party was, collectively, the people baying for Jesus' blood. Like an Old Testament scapegoat, Jesus had the sins of the world heaped on his shoulders and was sent off into the wilderness of friendlessness. In the film "Heavens Above" the West Midlands social-minded vicar played by Peter Sellers has antagonised the locals because he just tried to offer a better and fairer way to live. The crowd gathered round his vicarage door, baying for his resignation if not his blood. And the forlorn figure of Sellers' priest pleaded, "What you want from me, I cannot give and what I have to offer you, you do not want". And in that powerful cinematic moment, there is a clear echo of the sadness at the heart of Grim, Grisly, Good Friday. Jesus made the fundamental "mistake" of offering what the people needed and not what they wanted. The path of the true prophet has never been particularly popular.

SATURDAY***Shadows and Shame***

John 19.38-42

Darkness covers much pain. In the soul's shadowland, the light of hope and love is spent, the agony of isolation cuts deeply, the pain of guilt cripples, the crude knife of injustice twists. And into all of this comes a secret disciple, Joseph of Arimathea to see to the dignity of the dead. Secret, that is, because of fear. A shame, we might say, that he wasn't active amongst the crowd crying "Crucify!", shouting down their condemnation, pleading to be heard with the truth of Jesus' innocence. Ten thousand people turned out for Robert Burns' funeral, which passed in much pomp. A shame the ten thousand were not on hand to help when the poet died in poverty just a few days earlier. Darkness covers much pain, but silence covers much shame. In the deep shadowland darkness of this day, the questions press hard and hope seems buried.

EASTER SUNDAY***Gardeners and Greatness***

John 20.1-18

Jesus was the gardener! Like a garden left to grow wildly out of control or water-deprived till it withers to arid ruin, the death of Jesus brought an overwhelming sense of sad chaos and an empty, shrivelled sense of all hope being lost. But on the arid front, Jesus had described himself as, "living water". And on the chaos side, Jesus had enabled faith to heal many, not least the haemorrhaging woman, overwhelmed by her illness. Mary, outside the tomb, sees someone, she knows not who. Grieving water, rather than living water, is flowing in copious tears. Perhaps the blur tears give deprived her of clear sight. But when Jesus said her name, she knew. And she had thought he was the gardener! But he was!! Of course the actual garden around the tomb would need to be tended by others, but the spiritual garden was precisely his domain. The overgrowth of sorrow and confusion would be pruned back, the arid hopelessness living-watered back to life.

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