

PARISH OF ABINGDON-ON-THAMES



HOLY WEEK ADDRESSES 2017

CANON ROBERT TEARE

CHURCH OF ST MICHAEL & ALL ANGELS



## INTRODUCTION

A couple went to Oberammagau to see the Passion Play. When they got home, their friends in the Parish wanted to know all about it. The man was quite dismissive – ‘well I thought it was all a bit of a waste of time and money. I was most disappointed. For a start, it was very difficult to follow and I kept wondering where we were ..’ At this point his wife could no longer control herself and burst in: ‘you are fine one to talk. You were there at the beginning and then you went out for a coffee and then again, a bit later you went to make sure lunch was ordered and just to taste the beer, you got back in time to escort me to the restaurant. You enjoyed your lunch and had several more beers and as soon as we got back to the auditorium you went straight off to sleep. When you woke up you needed to go to the loo and then you told us that you just needed a nice cup of tea – or that is what you told us when we eventually found you back in the bar.’

The trouble is that for too many of us we come to Church on Palm Sunday and then do nothing until Easter Day and then cannot quite make out what all the excitement is about ‘have I missed something?’ Well yes, you have. You have missed, in Holy Week, the privilege of walking with Jesus through the last days of his life. First, into Jerusalem as we re-live that first Palm Sunday and then through Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday as the tension rises and we feel again the forces of evil swirling around Jesus as his enemies plot against him. On Thursday, the Eucharist of the Last Supper with the washing of the feet and the walk to Gethsemane and the Watch is exactly as the Gospel tells us. Then on Good Friday we stand in awe at the foot of the Cross as we remember that Jesus died for humankind. Holy Saturday begins as a day of complete numbness and exhaustion until the Vigil when we hear again the prophecies that brought Jesus and humankind to the point of his death and Resurrection. It all comes together as the new fire is lit and the Light of Christ is carried into the darkened Church. Jesus Christ is risen.

And the closer we walk, the more we will understand and the more we understand the louder we will want to sing Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia at our Eucharist on Easter Morning.

Come walk with us; come walk with Christ.

\*\*\*\*\*

I will be using to lead us through the addresses from Monday to Friday, a poem by a poet called Bill Vanstone, who died some 18 years ago. He was a priest who spent most of his ministry in Parish.

Morning glory, starlit sky,  
soaring music, scholar's truth,  
flight of swallows, autumn leaves,  
memory's treasure, grace of youth.

Open are the gifts of God,  
gifts of love to mind and sense;  
hidden is love's agony,  
love's endeavour, love's expense.

Love that gives, gives ever more,  
gives with zeal, with eager hands,  
spares not, keeps not, all outpours,  
ventures all, its all expends.

Drained is love in making full,  
bound in setting others free,  
poor in making many rich,  
weak in giving power to be.

Therefore he who shows us God  
helpless hangs upon a tree;  
and the nails and crown of thorns  
tell of what God's love must be.

Here is God: no monarch he,  
throned in easy state to reign;  
here is God whose arms of love aching,  
spent, the world sustain.

*Robert Teare*  
*Holy Week 2017*

**Monday evening.** Isaiah xlij:1-9; John xij:1-11.

Morning glory, starlit sky,  
soaring music, scholar's truth,  
flight of swallows, autumn leaves,  
memory's treasure, grace of youth.

The chief joy of walking, even through a town centre, at this time of year is the sudden, unexpected, and joyous assaults on all of one's senses. Flashes of colour from glimpses of daffodils or primroses, the sound of birds busy in their courting, the first smell of a new season's new-mown grass, the touch of warmth from the sun on one's arms and one could add, morning glory, starlit sky, soaring music, scholar's truth, flight of swallows, memory's treasure, grace of youth. Each of these things, each of these sensations bring us joy and pleasure. Actually, in our garden, even Autumn leaves in their fading colours refresh memory's treasure.

But we only notice these sensations if we stop and attend to them. Too often we just rush past them, too often we so pre-occupied with other things, we miss them. They echo the words of Jesus who said to the Pharisees, that even if the disciples kept silence, even the stones would shout out the wonder of their Creator. [Luke xix:39-40] The especial importance of this week is that we have, or we should have time to stop and look and listen not exclusively to the beauty of God's world but rather to enter a little more deeply into what is, without doubt, the horror of it all, so that we may understand a little more the extent of Christ's victory and the wonder of the Resurrection.

This the last chapter of the story starts, as the Gospel told us, six days before the Passover, in Bethany. Jesus has a meal with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Mary Magdalene will be with Jesus through the full drama of Holy Week and, according to John is the first witness of the Resurrection. But here she does something that is totally out of sequence. She washes and anoints Jesus' feet. It is nothing to do with Jesus' actions on Maundy Thursday It is as though he is already dead. She is preparing his body to be wrapped in the grave clothes and laid in the tomb. There will be a hurried apology for all this on Good Friday, that, after all, is why the women came hurrying to the tomb on the first Easter morning, to finish the work that they could not do on the

Friday evening, before the Sabbath began and that work would have been forbidden.

Here Mary anticipates Jesus death and his need for anointing. This is not a covert message to us about our own dying rather she is telling us that if Jesus is really human his life must end in his death, there is no escaping it, indeed unless Jesus dies he cannot overcome death for us.

So, we walk soberly and as we walk we become more conscious of Jesus' humanity. This is not a Passion play, this is the real thing, the agony in the Garden is agony, the pain of the scourging and the crowning with thorns and the nailing to the cross and the agony of dying is real, absolutely real. We may be very moved when we see our children and grand-children in their school productions, but we who walk that way of the Cross this week need to find in the agony of Christ, the agony of his world.

Here is Syria and Iraq and South Sudan and the Central African Republic and Northern Nigeria and Somalia and here are the sixty-four point three million people in Refugee Camps throughout the world, or waiting seemingly endlessly across Europe. Here are all those European citizens in this country worried about their futures and all those British ex-patriots in Europe worried that they will be sent home. And here too are all those suffering in private agony: the private agony of rejection or sexual abuse or domestic violence or loneliness. Here is all of human life and all of human dying. Here is Jesus, Jesus for us, Jesus entering our pain and the pain of his world, walking with us as we try to walk with him.

One of the great stories of the Old Testament is the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the Book of Daniel. [chapter 3] You remember they were thrown into the burning fiery furnace because they would not bow down and worship the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar. The furnace was so hot that the soldiers who were charged to throw the men into it were themselves overcome with the heat and died. The King looks and says didn't we throw three men into the furnace, but I can now see four walking round in it and the fourth looks like a son of the gods. Archbishop Antony Bloom, one time leader of the Russian Orthodox church in this country says that this is the perfect image of the intercessor. The one who voluntarily goes into the furnace of life to walk with those in need. Here is Jesus in his incarnate life and here are we who walk with him.

It is very easy to find God in morning glory, starlit sky, soaring music, scholar's truth, flight of swallows, autumn leaves, memory's treasure, grace of

youth. And if you are, like me, that is the best place to start. But this week we need to move on and find Jesus in the world's agony.

Morning glory, starlit sky,  
soaring music, scholar's truth,  
flight of swallows, autumn leaves,  
memory's treasure, grace of youth.

**Tuesday** Isaiah xlix:1-7 & John xij:30-36

Open are the gifts of God,  
gifts of love to mind and sense;  
hidden is love's agony,  
love's endeavour, love's expense.

There is a story of a very old hermit, who had, near the end of his life, a sudden attack of doubt as to whether, in his life-long seeking after God, he had been profoundly selfless, or profoundly selfish. And his prayer turned into what one could only describe as a scream of help – show me someone who is truly self-less. Sometime later he dreamt an angel woke him in the night and asked the old man to follow him. ‘Your question will be answered’, the angel said.

They walked to the nearby town, the angel was silent and the hermit was busy thinking who it might be in the town who would know the answer to his question. They passed the Bishop's house and the cathedral and several parish churches, and the University, but the angel did not slacken his pace and looked neither to the left nor to the right. The hermit could not help but notice that they were now in the poorest part of the town, one might say a real slum. Finally, the angel led the hermit into one of the houses. They were obviously invisible to the young woman who was sitting by a table. In fact, by the time the hermit saw her, the two of them had already been in the one other room, where four children were tucked in bed, fast asleep. It was obvious, from the rags on the bed and the cold of the room that this was house of poverty, but the children were all immaculately clean as was their bedroom and the other room. Again, the mark of it was poverty and cleanliness. The young woman at the table was the mother – the hermit could divine nothing of her circumstances – just that she was alone and looking after four children as one used to say, on the smell of an oil-rag. Though it was way past mid-night, he had heard the clock strike as they came into town, she was still working. A single candle lit the room, providing both light and heat. There was a great pile of clothes on the table that she was mending, a stitch here, an alteration there, and another pile of things that she was making, either for the coming festival, or a birthday, or because the children were growing.

Here was the hermit's answer, here was the person who was totally selfless, here was the person whose only thought was for her children.

Now you could complain that the angel was cheating in showing that woman to the hermit, or you could complain that I am cheating by telling you a story that does not apply to us – we are not destitute, we're not, I imagine young mums, we don't live in a town where there is a University or a Cathedral. It is nothing to do with us. But that is not the point, the point is that love's agony, love's endeavour, love's expense is hidden. We see the pictures, we hear the news, we watch our televisions, we pray for peace reconciliation and justice, but the real pain in the world is hidden.

I remember a picture of refugees who had been rescued from the Mediterranean. Their boat had sunk and many of their number had died. One of the women who was being carried ashore was actually in the process of giving birth. I don't know where you could even begin to enter that woman's agony or how you could imagine what things were so dreadful that they had make her leave; family, friends, home? I remember the friends with whom I discussed this wondered whether, in fact, she had been pregnant, when she set out, had she been on the road for more than nine months already. We just do not know, we look at the pictures, read the words, listen to the voices but the reality of it all is hidden and there is no way that we can enter the pain except through our prayers.

But our prayers will only be real if treat those people whom we rub shoulders with, in our daily lives, as fellow human beings, as brothers and sisters, walking alongside them. They too are made in the image of the same God. They too were redeemed by the same Christ – and not just the people who are already family and friends, or already within the Church Community but all the people we meet in our daily round, the person on the till in the super-market or at the corner shop, the bus-driver, the lollipop lady, the carer. I could go on, people who seldom have names even if there is a label on their uniform, but they are people just like us, with the same hopes and fears as us and the same deep love as us, but it is hidden from us until we see them as fellow human beings. Jesus did just that and died for them – and for us.

Open are the gifts of God,  
gifts of love to mind and sense;  
hidden is love's agony,  
love's endeavour, love's expense.

## Wednesday Isaiah 1:41-9a & John xii:23-32

Love that gives, gives ever more,  
gives with zeal, with eager hands,  
spares not, keeps not, all outpours,  
ventures all, its all expends.

We live in a blame culture. Something goes wrong, someone must be blamed, compensation must be paid. I read, just after the terrorist tragedy in London, a couple of weeks ago, that it was all Boris Johnson's fault, because when he was Mayor of London he had insisted that there be cycle lanes on Westminster Bridge and the perpetrator of the attack was able to drive along the empty cycle lane instead of being stuck in the usual traffic jam.

The problem with a blame culture is that as soon as we have pinned the blame fairly and squarely on someone, there is no need to look any further. Boris did it. And the fact that no-one could have foreseen this eventuality or why one earth was this man radicalised or what were the police and security services doing is conveniently forgotten.

And I have this same slight worry about Judas. First of all, everything that was written about him was written well after the event. Secondly because he was the traitor everyone else was let off the hook. What if, rather, Judas was so convinced that Jesus was the Messiah that he was sure that once the High Priest and the Sanhedrin met him for themselves that they would be convinced too. So, he arranged the meeting, but it all went tragically wrong. The fact that he accepted money for this information goes against him of course, but he was also the holder of the common purse and his reaction to Mary's anointing of Jesus feet with the very precious ointment was exactly the right reaction of a person worried that outgoings were always on the verge of being far greater than income – like any responsible PCC treasurer, for instance. If he was rather tight with money then he was well suited to look after the common purse when from Jesus down the apostles and the women with them were known for their generosity. And, as soon as he realised that his plan had not worked, he rushed out and committed suicide, this in sharp contrast to Peter, who merely went out and wept.

For us being mistaken about Judas' real motives are the facts that first, Jesus called him, he was one of the Twelve; secondly, Jesus washed his feet and thirdly, he was present at the Eucharist of the Last Supper. Jesus did of course, say that one of those at the last Supper would betray him. But not who

it was, Judas, or Peter or any of the rest who all ran away. It was only John and the women, who stuck with Jesus until the bitter end.

Now I am not suggesting that we should be out in the streets with banners demonstrating – Judas, was innocent, rewrite history, rewrite Dante. But I am saying that when we walk with Christ during Holy Week, we just need to remember that maybe we don't proclaim Christ with the fervour we ought in our daily living. Maybe we subtly betray him by the stinginess of our giving, maybe we creep past on the other side of the road when there is suspicious looking – well could be a person lying in the gutter on the other side of the road. Perhaps we have indeed failed to give food to the hungry or drink to the thirsty or clothes to the naked or visited the sick or the imprisoned. [Matthew xxv:31-46] For all that is part of the betrayal of our calling: part of our betrayal of Christ.

When a woman caught in the very act of adultery was brought to Jesus, he said let he who is without sin throw the first stone. And the crowd melted away, beginning with the eldest. [John viij:1-11] When Jesus looked at Peter and Peter realised what he had done and went out and wept [Luke xxij:61-62], Jesus' look was not a look of condemnation, but a look of love and understanding – 'I have forgiven you already'. If Judas had had the courage to look there would have been the same look of love and the same understanding. And that challenges us in our own weaknesses and sins and in our failure to look at Jesus and to see that same look of love and understanding. 'I am giving my life for you'.

Love that gives, gives ever more,  
gives with zeal, with eager hands,  
spares not, keeps not, all outpours,  
ventures all, its all expends.

**Maundy Thursday.** Exodus 12:1-8 & 11-14; I Corinthians xj:23-26 &  
John xii:1-17 & 31b-35

Drained is love in making full,  
bound in setting others free,  
poor in making many rich,  
weak in giving power to be.

You should shiver slightly, this evening, when you hear the words, ‘on the night that he was betrayed, Jesus took bread.’ For that is exactly what we are doing. So too the washing of the feet, which is so alien to our culture, should be profoundly moving. And our first reaction is always Peter’s – I don’t want it done to me. There are times in our lives when people try to give us things which are just too big, too extravagant for us to accept and tonight we commemorate two of them.

Foot washing would not have been alien in Jesus time. There are numerous references to it in both the Old and the New Testaments and in the dust and the heat it was both welcome and necessary. But it was the job for the most junior of junior servants. Not because it was necessarily unpleasant, rather it was so menial, so degrading, you had to kneel at the other’s feet to do it and in the process both the water and the dirt would have splashed over you. But it is a job that requires precious little skill as you will see in a moment when Fr Paul and I attempt it.

And then the meal: bread and wine – that sounds almost exotic to us with all the talk in our colour supplements about the rise of the Artisan bakery and the wines that we ought to be buying for the Easter holiday. Except there was nothing in the slightest exotic about the bread that Jesus took, it was the simplest, the most universal of foods still found, I imagine in every country in the world, made from different, but naturally occurring indigenous ingredients – flours made from all the grains that you have heard of and others like plantains, quinoa, and manioc, that you might know nothing about, flour and water and then fire. And when you are starving, literally or metaphorically, delicious even if it is the only food that you are getting. And then wine – I think that if Jesus were alive to-day and living, for example in South East Asia, it wouldn’t be wine at all that he would choose, but green tea. If the water is not fit to drink, or safe to drink, you must find some other way of drinking. In

first Century Palestine that was wine. Not a luxury drink that you sniffed and swirled round in your mouth and talked of grape types and soil conditions, except perhaps at Cana in Galilee, but the difference between life and death by thirst.

And Jesus when he had given thanks gave it to his disciples: this is my body: this is my blood. We can only begin to understand what Jesus is giving us, if we understand what it is to give of ourselves. But we see this giving all around us: wives and husbands giving of themselves to each other, parents, and grand-parents and, these days, great grand-parents giving of themselves to their off-spring, but then there are teachers and nurses and priests and countless people in countless churches who may seem to have no-one special but we know, from our own experience here,SS give of themselves unremittingly for others.

Our gospel reading ended with Jesus saying: 'I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done for you'. But it is not to be confined to this one night nor to this one church. It is an example of how we should behave in the world every day. But best of all this wondrous meal not only feeds us now but strengthens us and empowers us, by surrounding us always with Jesus' love, his body and his blood given for us.

Saint Francis of Assisi told us to preach the Gospel at all times and if there was no other way to use words. Jesus did just this tonight, by giving himself totally in service by washing feet and in bread and wine which is for us his body and blood every time we make Eucharist together.

Drained is love in making full,  
bound in setting others free,  
poor in making many rich,  
weak in giving power to be.

## Good Friday

Therefore he who shows us God  
helpless hangs upon a tree;  
and the nails and crown of thorns  
tell of what God's love must be.

Here is God: no monarch he,  
throned in easy state to reign;  
here is God whose arms of love aching,  
spent, the world sustain.

Bill Vanstone's poem started so powerfully by reminding us of all the signs of wonder that surround us whether we see them or not.

Morning glory, starlit sky,  
soaring music, scholar's truth,  
flight of swallows, autumn leaves,  
memory's treasure, grace of youth.

And then it leads us into the reality of the world and the cost of loving. But the real wonder of it all – indeed the thing that should fill us with total awe – is that even here Jesus is with us. Even here Jesus overwhelms death and gives us the victory.

But what does that mean? First, it means that Jesus did truly experience every aspect of our lives from the joy of his childhood and a wedding at Cana in Galilee through every human situation right until he was unjustly condemned not only to a criminal's death, but in reality, to one of the cruellest most agonising methods of execution that humankind has ever devised. So brutal it is still hard to talk about. And he died and was buried. In other words, there is no aspect of human existence that Jesus did not experience. We can say to others, you don't understand me, you do not know what I am feeling, we can never say that to Jesus.

Secondly, he reminds us that death is a fact of our mortality. If we are human we die. Paradoxically that is helpful to know, whether we are sitting at the bedside of someone who is dying or wrestling with the whole problem of terminal care. There are still some who feel that death means medicine has failed, rather it means that our life in this world is now over and a new life begins.

For thirdly, Jesus overcame death by rising from the dead on the third day. We say this every time we say the Creed. St Paul is absolutely convinced about this and tells us that if we begin to ask questions that is foolish. [see especially I Corinthians xv] The Evangelists are warier of saying what it means. Matthew seems to have got death and resurrection on the same day, as Jesus dies the curtain in the Temple is rent in two and the graves are opened. [Matthew xxvij:51-53] Mark barely mentions the Resurrection, in fact Biblical critics say that the end of his Gospel [Mark xvj:9-20], the bit about Resurrection, is written by another hand. And Luke and John who write more also disagree.

The Resurrection is a mystery, a mystery not in the sense that we that if we knew more we would understand more – as in my smart phone is not working, what do I need to do - but a mystery in the sense that it is a truth far great than we can ever comprehend – a mystery like love, or beauty, or wonder. It is a mystery in which we find God. And no amount of learning or analysis or research, in this life, is going to give us the full answer. But we do have some inklings about it when we realise that those whom we love but see no longer – in other words those who have died, do live on in our hearts in a very real way and there are places that we associate them with, or objects in our houses that we have inherited from them, that remind us of them every time that we visit those places or handle those objects. We remember them and they live for us.

And, of course, the same is true with Jesus. As the disciples, on the Emmaus Road said, their hearts warmed, as the stranger they were walking with explained the Scriptures to them but they only finally recognised Jesus in the Breaking of Bread. [Luke xxiv:13-35] And that is exactly how we still find Jesus and understand Jesus and are fed by Jesus. This is freedom. This is redemption. And it is only in Christ's death, in his wondrous gift of selfless love that we can begin to understand this:

Therefore he who shows us God  
helpless hangs upon a tree;  
and the nails and crown of thorns  
tell of what God's love must be.

Here is God: no monarch he,  
throned in easy state to reign;  
here is God whose arms of love aching,  
spent, the world sustain.