WEST WORCESTER GROUP

Sunday, 5 April, 2020
Palm Sunday

As we enter Holy Week, the strangeness of the current situation may hit us particularly hard. During the ten years I have been ordained, I have consistently found Holy Week the most moving and profound part of the year, even as it is often the busiest. The progression from the triumph of Palm Sunday, to the poignancy of Maundy Thursday, to the despair of Good Friday, to the joy of Easter Day, as marked through the Church's liturgy, is always a special time. This year, however, we cannot do this. Part of the meaning of Holy Week derives from our shared commemorations, yet with the churches closed we must find new ways of marking this most significant of weeks in the Christian year.

That will not be easy. While many of our colleagues have taken to live streaming Eucharists from their homes, Sarah and I have intentionally avoided doing so. If you want to follow a Eucharist, there are plenty online, not least that being done daily by Worcester Cathedral. For us, however, the very essence of the Eucharist is that it is participatory, a sharing in the body and blood of Christ. It seems meaningless for us to do it alone in our studies, for which reason we have taken the difficult decision to refrain from such celebrations until such time as we are able to do it together with you in a resumption of our shared life.

There are many Church of England liturgies available which will help you to mark Holy Week as you see fit, while Sarah and I will of course be happy to provide materials and help for those who desire them. Here, I offer simply the readings, a prayer and a reflection for each day of Holy Week, to help you walk through the following days in these most unusual and undesirable of circumstances.

Phil

Palm Sunday

5 April

Readings

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Philippians 2:5-11

Matthew 21:1-11 (Palm Gospel) *or* 26:14-27:end (Passion Gospel)

Collect

True and humble king,
hailed by the crowd as Messiah:
grant us the faith to know you and love you,
that we may be found beside you
on the way of the cross,
which is the path of glory.
Amen.

Reflection

They were there two thousand years ago, lining the streets of the imperial capital and cheering, as the latest victorious general made his way through Rome with his army and loot. They were there centuries later, packed into narrow thoroughfares and applauding the king as he entered the city in state, as they would still be there halfway through the twentieth century as a young queen was paraded through Westminster to receive her crown. They were there thirty years ago, packing squares in their millions from Berlin to Sofia, in peaceful solidarity seeking an end to half a century of oppression. They are still there today, lauding great moments of achievement and mourning at times of sorrow, in streets and squares across the world.

But they were also there, nineteen centuries ago, in the Colosseum, baying for blood and urging the emperor to show no mercy to the stricken gladiator lying bleeding on the sand. They were there for hundreds of years afterwards, jeering beside the road at those being taken to their executions, taunting the figure on the scaffold or the pyre as he met his grizzly end. They were there as the streets of Paris ran red with noble blood, mocking the latest unfortunate on the way to the guillotine and indulging in an orgy of gore and destruction. And they are still there, finding excuses for rioting and violence the world over.

They are the crowd. A mass of people, a blur of anonymous faces where the general mood legitimises what happens. It is so very easy to be swept away in the mob mentality, ceasing to think critically or logically about what we are doing as we join in with what others around us are chanting or doing. The crowd is a safe place, or at least it was until last month when it suddenly became the world's greatest source of peril. Before then, in a crowd we were free of individual obligations, responsibilities and accountability. The crowd can be an exhilarating, energising place and it can be an experience of terror and uncertainty. The mood can change over weeks, over days, over hours, or even in the space of a few minutes. One acclaimed a hero one day can soon be a source of derision if the crowd turns against them, and then justice and reason and truth itself are cast aside to satisfy the crowd. What are such concepts in the face of the crowd, the people assembled in search of vengeance? How terrible the injustices and crimes perpetrated in the name of the people, because none could be found to speak up or oppose the cries of the mob.

So it is in Jerusalem in the reign of the Emperor Tiberius, the setting for the story we commemorate this week. Today the crowds acclaim Jesus, strew his way with palms and cheer him on his way. By Friday morning he will be on trial for his life, abandoned by his terrified followers. And as he stands before the Roman governor, those same crowds will scream

for his blood and seek clemency for a murderer in his stead. In under a week, the cheers have turned to jeering. As sentence of death is passed, the blame attaches to Pilate, the man who pronounces judgement. The gospel writers later tried to attribute blame to the Jewish leaders. Yet the condemnation received is crucifixion, the penalty for those seen by Romans as political rebels and threats to the state. Those crowds who cheered Jesus on his way in a quasi-royal procession, arousing the Roman terror of kingship, have delivered him to Pilate by making him a threat to Rome. Now, safe in the knowledge that they are anonymous, that their mass of indistinct faces will save anyone from knowing their individual identities and holding them to account, those same crowds force the governor's hand, compelling him into an action for which they are all responsible. It would have taken a stronger and better man than Pontius Pilate to resist the fickle crowds in their lust for blood. Thus is an innocent man sent on his way to one of the most brutal deaths human beings have devised, at the insistence of a howling crowd whom the victim has failed to satisfy, a gruesome expression of the popular will.

The gospel narrative has been compressed and reworked for dramatic effect, but it expresses something fundamental about humanity. Faced with the truth of Jesus in their midst, the crowd responded at one moment with unrestrained acclamation and the next with unrestrained derision. His disciples fled. Yet in the midst of the hatred and fallibility of humankind, Jesus continued on the path to Golgotha, for his love for that faithless, flawed crowd and humanity as a whole would not stop short of the cross. Lest we see it as a tale of long ago, remember those tempestuous crowds which have survived the ages and how the despised and innocent continue to suffer as a consequence of some ephemeral concept termed 'the people's will'. If we wave palms and laud Christ today, do we also weep with him at the suffering of Jerusalem, of the Middle East, and of the world in general? Or when we see the consequences of Christian love, that it means not looking after

ourselves and our own but seeking to transform the world to include all God's children, does our self-interest cause us to turn and join the crowd yelling for Jesus to be nailed to the cross with all those ideas which demand we love others? The demands of the crowd today are not for a better world, for the love and compassion Jesus urged, but for leaders who defend us and our interests, at the expense of all others. For all we might like to delude ourselves, few if any of us would have been keeping vigil with Mary on Friday morning. Most may have melted away like the disciples. More than we might like to acknowledge would have been screaming at the governor. In a world so dominated right now by populism and hatred of the other, that is a sobering thought we would all do well to dwell upon as we reflect this Palm Sunday. Do we join the crowd, or do we speak up for what is right, in spite of the cost?

Monday of Holy Week

6 April

Readings

Lamentations 1

Hebrews 9:11-15

Luke 19:41-44

Collect

Heavenly Father,
who anointed your Son Jesus Christ
with the Holy Spirit and with power
to bring to the world the blessings of your kingdom:
anoint your Church with the same Holy Spirit,
that we who share in his suffering and his victory
may bear witness to the gospel of salvation;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Reflection

There is a story that during the Third Crusade, King Richard I of England suddenly found himself on a ridge overlooking Jerusalem in the distance. He rapidly threw his shield in front of his face to hide the view from his sight, tearfully begging God that he might not be forced to look upon the city if he could not deliver it for Christianity. Despite being so close to his target, Richard knew that his tired, undersupplied Crusader army had little chance of taking Jerusalem, and no chance of holding the city. Reluctantly, he gave the order to retreat to Jaffa and the Mediterranean

coast. The king known as the Lionheart, in whom had been invested the hopes of Christendom for the recapture of Jerusalem, had withdrawn without even attempting a siege. His great dream, of being the leader of a crusading army which won back this holiest of cities at the centre of the world, lay in tatters.

Richard has not been alone in crying over Jerusalem. Two of our readings today bear testimony to the ability of the city to reduce people to tears. The first, from Lamentations, was composed after the greatest catastrophe the Jews had ever known, the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in the early sixth century BC, after which the entire ruling elite were dragged to exile in Babylon. David's city, in which the ark of the Lord resided, was no more, cause for the author or authors of Lamentations to despair and weep. And it is not only the events of the past that produce such reactions. Lamentations looks backwards at a calamity that has happened; in the gospel reading, Jesus cries over Jerusalem for a calamity that is yet to occur. On the alleged site where this happened stands a church whose name, Dominus Flevit ('the Lord wept'), is taken from the text in the Latin Vulgate of the gospel we have just read. Jesus was on his way into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and despite the triumphal entry and joyous shouting of the crowds, he could see that the city into which he was welcomed would never know the peace he was trying to bring.

A city that reduces people to tears of anguish. It is not the initial reaction of many pilgrims as they behold Jerusalem from Dominus Flevit. I am sure that those of you who have had the privilege of visiting will not have quickly forgotten your first glimpse of the Old City from the Mount of Olives; it is a striking panorama. But if you can find a picture of it online, or conjure up one in your mind, look closely at the most conspicuous features: the bulky city walls, built by Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent in the sixteenth century; the Dome of the Rock, its coloured tiles and gold dome dominating the skyline; the duller, grey dome of the Church

of the Holy Sepulchre behind it; and any number of other church towers, minarets and markers of religious buildings rising from the labyrinth of the Old City. Then think about Jesus' words as he wept over Jerusalem. He was lamenting the fact that people did not recognise the message of peace he brought, the consequence of which would be the brutality and bloodshed that has tormented Jerusalem for the subsequent two millennia and continues to do so. If you have read anything about the history of the city, you will know how many times it has been attacked, besieged and conquered, and how much blood has been spilt in it and over it. It is a history of tragedy and violence which could reduce anyone to tears. And the memorials to that violence are the dominant landmarks of that view from Dominus Flevit. Christians have tried to mark every site which can possibly be associated with Jesus, and many more besides. Muslims hold the Dome of the Rock as sacred because of its associations with Muhammad's Night Flight. Jews hold the same site sacred as the site of the Temple, the last remnant of which is found in the Western Wall. The demonstration of faith is reduced to possession of holy places. Nowhere is that more tragically visible than in one of Christianity's holiest sites, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where the key must be kept by a Muslim family because the Christian denominations so distrust each other. You will have seen the news articles over the years about the fights between denominations in the Holy Sepulchre and in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Jesus came with a message of peace, a path which encompassed changing our attitudes so that we continually forgive others and look to be living examples of God's love and justice in the world. It is no wonder that he shed tears at how that message would be abused, how it would become about ownership of his physical human legacy rather than adherence to his divine message.

This alerts us to the dangers of the idolatry of place. On pilgrimage to the Holy land, one sees interesting sights, challenging sights, things

which are exhilarating precisely because we suddenly understand the Bible in new ways or make sense of things which have always puzzled us. That is the joy of pilgrimage, that it gives us a tangible connection with the stories which underpin our faith and brings those stories to life. People will find that connection in differing ways: for some, it may be touching the rock of Golgotha; for others, sharing in fellowship beside the Sea of Galilee. Yet whether you have made that journey in person, or merely follow spiritually in the footsteps of the story this Holy Week, we must always remember that the setting for Jesus' ministry and message is not the message itself. That message was one of peace and reconciliation, one which transcends the boundaries of time and applies as much to the divisions and hatreds of modern Jerusalem as it did to the divisions and hatreds of Roman Jerusalem. Recalling the places where Jesus and others were imprisoned, denied basic human rights and cruelly treated, remember too the situation of those imprisoned and ill-treated in 2020. But remember as well the ability of God to transform situations of despair. The agony of Lamentations gave way to rejoicing at the return of the Jews and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. The grief of the disciples on Good Friday gave way to the ecstasy of Easter Day. And the pain of that much-brutalised, blood-weary city, a pain over which Jesus shed tears, is one which God can transform if enough people commit themselves to that transformation, to listening and working for the peace and love Jesus proclaimed. As we journey through the last earthly days of Jesus over the next few days, pray that we may be open to that message, and through our connections with the stories and places we encounter, may come to know more fully our callings in God's kingdom.

Tuesday of Holy Week

7 April

Readings

Isaiah 49:1-7

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Matthew 21:12-17 *or* Luke 19:45-48 *or* John 2:13-22

Collect

Almighty and everlasting God,
who in your tender love towards the human race
sent your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ
to take upon him our flesh
and to suffer death upon the cross:
grant that we may follow the example of his patience and humility,
and also be made partakers of his resurrection;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Reflection

The episode of Jesus overturning the tables in the Temple is one with which many Christians struggle, for here we have a Jesus who fails to conform to the cosy image so many like to project. Here, we are far from the meek, gentle figure of stained-glass windows and Sunday school, instead confronting actions and emotions which Christianity usually preaches against: violence and anger. The gospel texts are quite explicit, that Jesus angrily rebukes the sellers and money changers, overturning

their tables and forcing them from the Temple. In John, the violence is particularly explicit, as Jesus makes a whip of cords to drive people out. We cannot explain this away or try to turn it into something else. This is a Jesus consumed by rage, one who embodies his earlier words that he has 'not come to bring peace, but a sword'. It is the part of his message we nearly always try to overlook, concentrating on the words about peace and love. Here, though, we face the deeply uncomfortable scenario of Jesus enacting that division of which he spoke.

More than almost any other episode in the gospels, this episode is a decisive counter to all those who try to depoliticise Jesus or present him as the conduit for an anodyne message of general niceness. Jesus takes a visible, clear stand against the system of financial abuse being perpetuated in the Temple. The timing is key. In John's gospel, this takes place at the very start of Jesus' ministry, as he announces his intentions for the future in a very public and visible fashion. In the other three gospels, however, this scene follows the triumphal entry of Palm Sunday. There are numerous historical questions and doubts around the chronology, but on a theological and literary level, this is a critical narrative progression. Jesus enters Jerusalem in a mock-royal progression, hailed as a king. This is in itself a profoundly political act, for there was nothing so anathema in Roman political thought than kingship. Then Jesus causes a scene in the Temple in the run up to Passover. The Romans had a tricky relationship with the Jews in Jerusalem, being particularly alert to trouble at sensitive times like major Jewish festivals, which is why the governor moved to the city from his usual residence at Caesarea Maritima during such periods. A man playing at being a king, inciting trouble in the Temple at a tense time, was bound to displease the Romans. Remember that at the end of the week, Jesus was nailed to a cross. Crucifixion was the punishment for slaves and rebels. Jesus died the death of a political criminal, a sure sign

that the Romans viewed him at the very least as a potential political threat or problem.

Thus Good Friday – and the very nature of Jesus Christ – must be rooted in this scene in the Temple and compel us to address the anger of Jesus. It must stand as a rebuke to the ridiculous myth of the niceness of Jesus, for a nice man who just told people to be nice to each other would not have been nailed to a cross. Jesus saw and responded to the corruption and abuses around him. Injustice moved him to action and to anger, which in turn threatened the powerful and led him to Golgotha. This is thus a vital scene along the road to Golgotha and we must recognise it as such if we claim to walk the way of the cross. The Coronavirus crisis has laid bare power and wealth in all its ugliness, in a political class which exploits society and refuses to recognise the consequences of its abusive actions. For now, we must do what is necessary to move beyond this crisis. Afterwards, however, we must recognise that to vocally challenge injustice and hold its perpetrators to account is something Jesus himself modelled in the Temple. Christians cannot claim to follow Christ if they stand by meekly and allow injustice to triumph. The overturning of the tables in the Temple may leave us challenged and uncomfortable, but unless we confront it and absorb its message, we have not understood who Jesus was or what he calls us to do.

Wednesday of Holy Week

8 April

Readings

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Hebrews 12:1-3

Matthew 26:14-16

Collect

Heavenly Father,
you have called us in the Body of your Son Jesus Christ
to continue his work of reconciliation
and reveal you to the world:
forgive us the sins which tear us apart;
give us the courage to overcome our fears
and to seek that unity which is your gift and your will;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Reflection

Few people in human history have achieved the notoriety of Judas Iscariot. His name is familiar to nearly everyone, including those who have never opened a Bible. 'Judas' has become synonymous, in the western world, with 'traitor', a reference still readily understood when cast as an insult. In Dante's Inferno, Judas is found in Cocytus, the frozen lake which forms the central and worst circle of hell, the ninth, reserved for traitors. Indeed, Dante places him in the centre of the circle, at the

very heart of hell, one of three men (the other two are Brutus and Cassius, Julius Caesar's main assassins) whose sins are deemed heinous enough for them to be in the mouths of the three-headed Satan, Judas in the central mouth having his head gnawed as his back is flayed by Satan's claws. It is a graphic representation of where Judas Iscariot stands in Christian thought. He is the great traitor, the man who betrayed Christ for thirty pieces of silver, his reputation as dark and irredeemable as they come.

Thus do we offload all the blame onto one man. Across the centuries, Judas has been reviled. The ugliest manifestations have been anti-Semitic, 'justifying' the dreadful treatment meted out to Jews by making the traitor Judas the embodiment of treacherous Judaism. Even in less sinister approaches, he is the greatest villain of the piece, far more so than Pilate or Herod or Caiaphas. It makes the story so much more palatable, to be able to make the world's rejection of its saviour the work of a lone man. Judas can then be assigned the guilt which attaches more properly to humanity as a whole. Hence the evangelists write him into this role, even though so many of the details - the indignation over the waste of money on perfume, the thirty pieces of silver, the betrayal with a kiss, very possibly everything Judas does in the gospels - are inventions of a theological and literary imagination rather than historical fact. Judas is the perfect scapegoat.

Yet the great paradox at the heart of the story is troubling indeed. For a start, the Romans must already have had their sights set on Jesus; they were not given to arresting someone because a random nobody told them to do so. Moreover, Jesus was hardly moving about in secret, so in narrative terms the redundant device of a betrayer is jarringly unnecessary. Most troubling of all is the theological determinism. This must happen, Jesus says, but woe to the one who causes it to happen.

The betrayal is preordained, which means Judas is not making a free choice, but rather acting out a part already written for him in a drama which must follow the script. If he is nothing more than an actor playing his assigned role, where is his culpability? If God has forced this part upon him and he now suffers for it, does that not suggest a tyrannous, cruel God rather than a compassionate, loving one? Or could it be that this whole saga, from the carefully-weaved gospel narratives to the gruesome imaginings of Dante, tells us nothing about God and everything about the human need to scapegoat and shift blame onto others? Far from an individual actor in an historical story, Judas is symbolic of a part of the human condition, the darkness we wilfully avoid when we stare collectively into the mirror. How does that affect our reading of the Holy Week story?

Maundy Thursday

9 April

Readings

Exodus 2:1-14

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-17, 31b-35 *and* Matthew 26:36-46

Collect

God our Father,
your Son Jesus Christ was obedient to the end
and drank the cup prepared for him:
may we who share his table
watch with him through the night of suffering
and be faithful.
Amen.

Reflection

On the standard pilgrimage of the Holy Land, the first morning will normally see the group following the 'Palm Sunday route'. It descends a rather treacherous slope alongside a large graveyard, providing excellent views across the valley to the old city of Jerusalem, although the route is in no way historically verifiable. The pilgrimage trail ends in the 'Garden of Gethsemane', although once again there is no evidence that this handily placed spot is the actual location. Today, it could hardly be less like the peaceful, secluded spot suggested by a reading of the gospels. At times, it feels like the number of people per square foot exceeds that in Manila, the world's most densely populated city. The garden seethes with pilgrims and tourists, fractiously jostling one another to get pictures of some sorry-looking olive trees and other

people's feet. The small, overcrowded space sits in the shadow of the large, ostentatious Church of All Nations. To imagine the gospel scene, whether or not this was the place, takes an epic feat of the imagination.

Yet in one way, if it fails to reflect the Gethsemane story, the purported site of the garden today is a mirror of Jesus' ministry. We often fail to give due attention to the Garden of Gethsemane, which gets lost between the events in the Upper Room and the drama of Jesus before Caiaphas. For John, Gethsemane is simply the place Jesus and his disciples enter for the arrest to take place; the long section between the Last Supper and that moment is filled with Jesus' comprehensive farewell discourse to his disciples. For the other three evangelists, Gethsemane is also the place of the arrest, but that event is preceded by another in the garden, one of the most evocative scenes in the entire Bible. It is the only moment, amidst the frenetic activity of the week between the triumphal entry and the crucifixion, that Jesus is recorded as being alone. All the rest of the time he is talking and ministering in public, or to be found with his disciples, or is in captivity. There are people around him constantly. It is a hectic, crowded existence. In Gethsemane, although he takes the disciples with him, he leaves then to withdraw to a solitary place and pray. Now, at long last, he needs to be alone as he comes to the climax of his earthly ministry. For this is the moment of crisis, the last moment of peace to be alone with his Father before he faces the great trials which lie ahead.

And his prayer in that moment is harrowing: 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.' It is a prayer of anguish, a plea from the very depths of solitude. This is the loneliness of his mission, a mission which only he can fulfil and which is his very reason for being, yet which naturally provokes fear in his human nature. There is no one who can empathise with him, for this is

something he alone can do. His disciples cannot even keep watch while he is praying without falling asleep. One of them has betrayed him to the authorities and will soon disturb the tranquillity of Gethsemane by leading a detachment of soldiers to arrest him. Another, one who swore forcefully that he would stay at Jesus' side to the bitter end, will in a few hours deny three times that he even knows him. The rest will scatter and flee. Only his mother and some of his female followers will be with him at the bitter end, as his life ebbs to its close on the cross. On his knees in despair in Gethsemane, Jesus reveals his humanity, both in the knowledge of the intense loneliness of his situation, but also in the determined obedience to stay faithful to his calling. Gethsemane reminds us of the intense cost of God's love. Jesus suffered.

Gethsemane and all that follow thus give added poignancy to the events of the Last Supper that we have just heard from John's Gospel. Jesus talks to his disciples in terms of friendship. He gets to his knees and washes their feet. He gives them a new commandment, to love one another as he has loved them. Yet in spite of his actions and his words, they do not understand and he must face the solitary path ahead. For him, all that happens in the Upper Room must be overshadowed by the knowledge of what is to come. Friendship will not permit the disciples to share his heavy, almost unbearable burden. They will not yet comprehend that divine love sufficiently to stand beside Jesus in his suffering and his death. That will come later, for sure, when they have the courage to preach the gospel and die for Christ. For now, though, Jesus can only show them the way. He can point to a complete inversion of the traditional concept of the relationship between humanity and God as he takes on the role of a servant, showing the utter futility of human concepts of hierarchy and status. It seems so very simple, the figure on his knees before his disciples, washing their feet in spite of all conventions and expectations. But it is so very complex, the beginning

of a process which will rip human history asunder and transform the world, and help us to understand who we truly are and who God truly is, as we journey from the Upper Room to Gethsemane to Caiaphas to Pilate to Golgotha, gradually coming to discern the love of a God who will not turn away even from the solitary suffering of the cross to bring humanity back to him.

And more than ever this Maundy Thursday, Gethsemane will resonate with us. We may not be facing imminent execution, but many of us at this time are alone, surrounded by a fear of death which is in danger of making our lives simply an existence to evade dying. A few minutes on the phone cannot substitute for real human contact, cannot dispel the sharp, lonely solitude so many are experiencing. People are alone, and many may well be praying in that loneliness that this cup be taken from them. Perhaps, in these circumstances, the Gethsemane story ceases to become a mere footnote we skip past in a dramatic narrative, but rather something which now helps us understand the extent of Christ's suffering and the enormity of God's love for the world.

Good Friday

10 April

Readings

Isaiah 52:13-53:end

Hebrews 10:16-25

John 18:1-19:end

Collect

Eternal God,
in the cross of Jesus
we see the cost of our sin
and the depth of your love:
in humble hope and fear
may we place at his feet
all that we have and all that we are,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Reflection

In the course of the last six weeks, we have witnessed something of the ugliness of human nature. Countries have sealed borders and shown a casual indifference to human lives, trapping millions far from home or refusing to reach out to help them return. States have effectively imposed military rule and house arrest for their entire populations. People have stripped supermarket shelves of toilet paper and hand sanitiser, many now finding themselves with three decades' worth at home after totally needless stockpiling. Politicians, especially in the United Kingdom and the United States, have desperately tried to shift the blame for the terrible consequences of their arrogance, indifference

and foolishness. Tax evaders now clamour for subsidies and bailouts from a welfare state they decried, as millions are at risk of poverty and starvation. Some police forces have taken it upon themselves to be the military arm of the government's wishes rather than the consensual enforcers of the law, in certain cases 'justifying' it on the spurious grounds that it is worse in other countries. There are people wandering around needlessly, oblivious to their own lack of reason to be out as they criticise and judge others. Depressingly, criminals have found new ways to exploit the vulnerable during lockdowns. One might look around and despair.

Yet over the last six weeks, we have also witnessed something of the beauty of human nature. In supermarkets, checkout assistants who must be exhausted and frightened continue to smile and chat cheerfully to customers in spite of everything. Denied proper protection equipment, testing and any real support by mealy-mouthed cabinet ministers, hundreds of thousands of NHS staff courageously continue to do their best in adverse circumstances to save lives and help the sick. Where the state has failed spectacularly, hundreds of thousands of volunteers have stepped in to offer their services. Behind the scenes, countless people have shown their essential goodness by helping elderly or vulnerable neighbours and relatives, making themselves available to support the needy, something we have seen first-hand here in St Johns. Stories of sacrifice and generosity emerge on a daily basis. One can also look around and rejoice.

This crisis has shown the contradictions of humanity, a nature which encompasses great kindness and great selfishness, often at tension within the same person. The contradictory nature of human beings, the fact that each of us can be both hero and villain, was fully understood by Tolstoy.

> One of the most widespread superstitions is that every man has his own special definite qualities: that he is kind, cruel, wise, stupid, energetic, apathetic and so on. Men are not like that. We may say of a man that he is more often kind than cruel, more often wise than stupid, more often energetic than apathetic, or the reverse; but it would not be true to say of one man that he is kind and wise, of another that he is bad and stupid. And yet we always classify mankind in this way. And this is false. Men are like rivers: the water is the same in one and all; but every river is narrow here, more rapid there, here slower, there broader, now clear, now dull, now cold, now warm. It is the same with men. Every man bears in himself the germ of every human quality; but sometimes one quality manifests itself, sometimes another, and the man often becomes unlike himself, while still remaining the same man.

The gendered language aside (*Resurrection* was published in 1899), this is thought-provoking, especially on Good Friday as we contemplate the different aspects of human character revealed in the narrative. Jesus preached peace but died as a political rebel. Peter will later show his courage in his martyrdom as the prince of the apostles, but he has just shown his cowardice in denying Jesus. Judas will later repent and throw aside his blood money, but he has just denied Jesus. The other disciples will take Jesus' message to the corners of the earth and die for it, but they have just fled in terror. Jesus will be beaten savagely by soldiers and jeered by onlookers, yet a stranger will help him bear his load on the way to Calvary. The story shows humanity at its best and at its worst, along with many places in between. We focus on and analyse the main characters, and their motivations and merits, in endless detail: Jesus, Peter, Judas, Pilate, Herod, Caiaphas. We divide them into heroes and villains and frame the story accordingly.

Perhaps this year, however, amidst the messiness of the human story, we should focus on a figure who is presented as more consistent than any other in the gospels. Aside from a couple of unlikely sentences in the problematic story of the wedding at Cana, her role is a silent one, the evangelists never letting her speak for herself. Yet she is there throughout, a quiet presence in the background, showing trust and obedience. Now, Mary kneels at the foot of the cross, experiencing something no mother wants to face. The son she held in her arms some thirty years ago is dying a brutal, agonising death above her and she can do nothing. She can't reach out and touch him, she can't comfort him or relieve his suffering. All she can do is keep vigil, assert by her presence that nothing can overcome her love for her son. And in a terrible way, that echoes profoundly on Good Friday 2020. People are reliving the experience of Mary, watching loved ones die without being able to touch them, to hold them, to comfort them. People are being buried without family and friends being allowed to be present. The state and religious authorities – albeit for very different reasons – forbid it, as they forbid us to comfort one another in our grief. The poignancy of this Good Friday is that we are experiencing some of the agony of Mary all those centuries ago. It is hard, at times it is almost unbearable. All we can do is what Mary did: love and trust in God's future.

Holy Saturday

11 April

Reflection

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

As the days of Coronavirus confinement succeed one another, these maudlin words uttered by Shakespeare's Macbeth, as he confronts his crumbling authority and his wife's death, increasingly become the backdrop to life. It no longer feels like life. It feels like we are all simply living to evade death, existing for the sake of existence as one day succeeds the next. There are any number of people online preaching sanctimoniously that we should think differently and embrace the situation, but this ignores reality for many people. There are people who live alone, for whom the isolation is crushing. There are people separated from partners or children. There are people locked at home with abusive partners. There are people coming to the end of their lives whose final days will now be ones of loneliness and despair. There are people who must leave their loved ones in solitude in the knowledge they will never see them again. There are those who see their livelihoods slipping away and have no idea how they will afford rent or basic necessities. There are people who must now wrestle with their demons

with no support around them. We may keep the number of Covid-19 deaths down, but the devastating consequences of doing so, especially for mental health, will only become apparent beyond this crisis.

One particular article today (nine days ago, if you are reading this on Holy Saturday) hit me particularly hard.[1] It told the story of a man in his late twenties with a rare, aggressive terminal cancer, who recognises that he will not live to see the end of the lockdown. It is poignant piece, one which impressed me with its dignity and lack of self-pity, but which left me raging against the injustice on his behalf. It all seems so unfair, that someone younger than I am will have to die alone, deprived of the last things he might have wanted to enjoy, those final moments with his friends and family. More than anything else – the incompetence of the government, the frustration of being confined at home rather than being able to do all my usual walking, the fact I can't meet someone for a drink or visit my friends – it was reading this which pushed me to the precipice of despair. Already, February looks like another world, an age of happiness vanished, never to return. And although statistics and medical probability suggest I am likely to make it to the end of lockdown, I can no longer look with confidence to there being such an end. For someone who lives inside their head, mind always racing, the cost of confinement is that it destroys hope in the future. I am increasingly doubting that I will ever again see my grandparents. I have lost the ability to envisage normality (whatever that is or was) or a world where I will ever again be able to jump on a train to see a friend, or meet someone for a drink in a pub. How can we return to normality if ending lockdown will simply increase transmission rates and start the cycle all over again? And without a future to look forward to, without hope, the present is

[1] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/02/terminal-cancer-lockdown-death?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

robbed of meaning. It becomes simply tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, an endless succession of identical days staring at the same walls, merely waiting for that day when tomorrow at last doesn't come.

That is the despair of Holy Saturday. It is easy to rush to the end, to look back through the lens of Easter and assert that everything will be OK. But that was not the experience of the disciples as day dawned after Good Friday. Their world had fallen apart. Just a week earlier, they had been part of an exciting, transformative movement. Yes, there had been challenges and difficulties, but they had followed a charismatic leader whose miracles, healings and message were causing a real stir. Now, though, it has all collapsed. That leader has been executed and hastily buried. His followers have fled in fear and ignominy. What is left? Everything to which they have just given their lives has proved illusory, pointless. How, after all that, do they just return to their normal lives? Saturday has dawned miserable and dark, the past in ruins, the future uncertain and meaningless. All that is left is tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow. Unlike God, however, the disciples cannot see that first tomorrow or know how he can turn utter despair into incredulous joy. We know it will be fine. They must inhabit their pain, as we must do now, trusting in the God of tomorrow.

Notices

Coronavirus (Covid-19)

Remember to keep up to date with latest government advice, especially on self-isolating and social distancing. The advice is given for a reason. It is not only for your own protection, but for the protection of the most vulnerable groups in society, so please do not interact with other people if you have symptoms or believe you have been exposed to the virus. If this causes problems, such as with obtaining food, we are available to help.

Shopping and Local Food Deliveries

The church websites and Facebook pages contain details of local delivery arrangements. If you need any help or assistance, please contact us.

Criminal Activity

Sadly, scammers are taking advantage of the Coronavirus situation, so we need to be extra vigilant. There is more information on the Action Fraud website. The key things to remember are STOP: take a moment to think before parting with money. CHALLENGE: it's okay to say no or ignore and PROTECT: contact your bank and report to Action Fraud if you think you've been a victim of a scam. If you have any queries about a communication you have received, do contact one of us to ask for help.