

Addresses given by Fr Stephen Tucker, Holy Week Preacher 2019

WITNEY - PALM SUNDAY 2019 9.15AM HAILEY **AND 10.45 ST MARY'S**

And so it begins.

For the rest of this week we shall be pondering in detail the story which gave birth to the church, the story which explains why we are here.

Some years ago, the actor, Alec McCowen, decided to learn by heart and then perform before an audience the whole of Mark's gospel. On stage, he used only a table and three chairs as scenery. The furniture represented the interior of a house, in front of them was the street or by the sea and behind them were the mountains. 'Once I established this in my mind', he wrote, '... the story started to push me around.'

The purpose of this week is to let the story push us around, to push us around emotionally, spiritually, intellectually, morally. We have today heard almost the whole story in advance, as it were setting out the programme for the week during which we shall ponder some of the details. But for now, we must concentrate on the reading we heard at the start of this service – though it may strike us as odd that so important a week should begin with such elaborate arrangements for the borrowing of a donkey.

Jesus comes up to Jerusalem from Jericho to the villages on the slopes of the Mount of Olives overlooking the city. Jesus has friends here, friends that even the disciples don't seem to know about. Jesus has made arrangements for this festival in advance. As a man who has no home and no possessions, he has to depend on the generosity of his friends. Today he needs a donkey.

Actually, Jesus is breaking the law by making such an arrangement. Jerusalem is a holy city - one must enter it on foot. When Kaiser Wilhelm rode into the city on a splendid white horse in 1898, the religious authorities were dismayed and shocked. When General Allenby took possession of the city in 1917, he more diplomatically entered on foot.

Jesus behaves neither like a Kaiser nor a general, but he does behave with authority. All the disciples have to say is that the master needs the animal and the bystanders understand. Even so Jesus also makes sure that they know he will return it promptly.

It's important to realise that this isn't some willing old beast of burden grazing contentedly under a palm tree. It's a young donkey, tied up outside the door of the house where the owner can keep an eye on it and it can't run away. It's a donkey that hasn't been broken in - no-one has ridden it yet. And to the minds of the first audience that makes it a surprisingly special sort of animal. We think of great men riding on tall white horses as the Kaiser did. But kings of Israel only rode horses in battle; in peace time they rode on the back of a donkey, that no-one else had ridden.

These arrangements are beginning to take on a regal note. Jesus mounts the animal and sets out and his progress is made easier by the disciples putting their cloaks on the rough ground and scattering the path with palm branches and grass so there's no chance of the colt slipping on the uneven ground.

There are lots of people around. Anything up to 300,000 pilgrims might come up to Jerusalem for Passover. Even on the back of a donkey Jesus is lost in such a large crowd. But his part of the crowd is special. These are his people. People from the north, people from the countryside. They sing the pilgrim slogans like a holy sort of football crowd. 'Hoshia-nna - Save now.' And the special chant to encourage one another. 'Blessed in the name of the Lord is the one who comes.' And in their midst riding on the donkey is someone they know coming into Jerusalem with a

special kind of authority. If the Jerusalemites get to hear about it there'll be trouble. But now as evening draws on there's a gentle joy, an innocent enthusiasm - a chance to cheer a man on a donkey who's touched their hearts and given them something to hope for, and now for the last time something to cheer about, as they stream past the Roman soldiers massed and ready for trouble at the city gates. Once into the city's narrow streets, the donkey is presumably sent back to its owner. Jesus has made his point - though the point is a little obscure, as all prophetic gestures are.

How to read this scene now? Well think of a famous photograph. It is June 5th 1989, the day after the Tiananmen Square massacre. This scene is set on the Avenue which runs east west along the southern end of the Forbidden city in Beijing. A column of Type 59 tanks drives slowly down the broad avenue. And then a man steps out from the crowd, carrying a shopping bag in each hand, and goes to stand in front of the leading tank. It tries to go around him, but each time he moves to stand in front of it. Eventually two figures in blue come out of the crowd and lead him away, never to be heard of again. We do not know whether he is even aware that what he did produced one of the most iconic images of the twentieth century.

As Jesus rode into Jerusalem, as a king on a donkey, he did not of course face tanks but he did face a Roman prefect who had at his immediate disposal 3,000 troops and who if the need arose could call upon the Syrian legate who had 20,000 infantry and 5,000 cavalry. And then there was the high priest, his Council - the Sanhedrin - and the Temple guards. And lastly there was the huge crowd of pilgrims, not all of them sympathetic and probably most of them just wanting a quiet life.

And Jesus enters this city as a king, yes - it is a dramatic, symbolic, prophetic gesture - a humble king on a donkey. But it is only a gesture as the man with his two shopping bags in front of a column of tanks was a gesture. And what do gestures count in the face of such overwhelming force - whether Chinese tanks or a Roman army which would forty years later destroy Jerusalem and its Temple?

And yet sometimes gestures are all we have; sometimes gestures become iconic; sometimes a gesture can in time become the beginning of an unstoppable movement; and these are the kind of gestures we witness this coming week - holy week - full of simple holy gestures; washing feet, breaking bread, kneeling before a cross, lighting a new candle - iconic gestures which still have the power to let the spirit of God loose in the world. Amen.

MONDAY IN HOLY WEEK - MINSTER LOVELL 7.30PM

Holy week is a life and death story. In Holy Week we speak of matters of life and death which are also our life and our death.

The word 'life' occurs in John's gospel more than in the other three gospels put together. In John's first chapter, we are told that in Jesus was life and the life was the light of the world. Later we are told that if we believe, we have everlasting life. Jesus is said to be life-giving water; he is the bread of life. He has the words of eternal life. He is the resurrection and the life. At the end of the gospel we are told that this book has been written that we may have life in Jesus' name. And Jesus has said to Martha in the previous chapter to the one we have just heard, 'Whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.' Sadly, Martha does not then say 'Whatever does that mean?' - so we are left wondering.

Now, if life and death are the agenda for Holy Week, we might be left wondering what sort of life is being talked about? Death will come later but for now we must consider life - eternal life. The word eternal raises problems. Does it mean life that goes on and on? That is unlikely. In the New Testament it is much more likely that it means the life of the age to come - in other words life in and with God, a life that cannot be taken away, but also a kind of life we can scarcely imagine, other than that it will be perfect. I say scarcely imagine, but John's gospel attempts to give

glimpses of what such life might be like. John's gospel claims that we can even experience such life now, though not all the time.

So how do we recognise the life being talked about? Clearly it is not life as we ordinarily know it. It has more to do with what we sense at the birth of a baby or the death of a loved one – something is given and something is taken away, something deeply precious, absolutely precious – even though we live in a world where that is so often forgotten. Life is a gift and therefore one definition of God is that he is the life giver, the one to whom we can express thanks for the preciousness we experience as life. And so, we might also say that to know God, means to be able to see life as precious, however much our experiences in life may sometimes make us feel something very different. Life can sometimes feel more like a heavy burden than a gift. So, we might say that belief in God, knowing God starts with our holding on through thick and thin, to the preciousness of life.

To do that, however, we need examples of what we are talking about – and tonight's gospel story provides one.

Bethany is in all the gospels a special place. It is set on the eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives, about 2 miles outside of Jerusalem. Today it is known as El Azariye – a name derived in Arabic from Lazarus, its most famous inhabitant. The name Bethany means house of dates or figs – it is the place of fruitfulness. It is according to all the gospels the place where Jesus stays as the last week of his life begins, in the household of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. We do not know much about these three. Martha is hard working – the provider of food. Mary is quiet and reflective – the woman who dares to sit at Jesus feet to listen to him – 'dares' because sitting at a teacher's feet was usually then reserved for men only. Lazarus, unlike his sisters, never says anything in this gospel, he is simply known as the one whom Jesus raised from the dead. Perhaps we might find that story difficult to believe, but perhaps we can at least say this: Lazarus represents someone who has had an experience of the preciousness of life because it seemed he had lost it. Life had been given back to him. And anyone who has had an experience like that must be challenged to think deeply about his life and what he is going to do with the rest of that life which has so nearly been lost.

So, Jesus is attending the last party of his life – a celebratory meal arranged by the whole village to honour and thank him. But then something strikingly odd happens. Mary anoints Jesus' feet, with a costly perfume, the fragrance of which fills the whole house. And then it says, 'Mary dried his feet with her hair.' And that is the puzzling detail. Why having gone to all the expense of anointing Jesus' feet with such perfume does Mary then wipe it away?

We have been told that clouds are gathering around Jesus. The Pharisees and the Jewish Council called the Sanhedrin, have identified what Jesus did for Lazarus as the cause of his increasing popularity. Because many more people are beginning to believe in Jesus, the Sanhedrin fearfully predict the destruction of their holy place and nation by the Romans. Jesus must therefore die for the sake of the people, or rather the preservation of the status quo. And then as we hear this evening, they decide that Lazarus must also die because of what he represents. So, the struggle between life and death unfolds.

At this party in Bethany where Jesus' love for this family spills over into the whole community it is dangerous for his whereabouts to be known. He could be arrested at any moment. So as Mary takes this precious ointment it is almost as though she feels that after Jesus has been killed by the authorities there may be no chance to give him a proper burial. She must do something now - she must make a gesture which will indicate the preciousness of the life of Jesus. Of course, it will only be a token anointing but something she feels must be done. But as she rubs this precious ointment into his feet Mary seems to sense something beyond the danger and the threat of death. 'Whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.' That is what Jesus has said to them. So, what is the point of anointing anyone who can say that? If Jesus is the Lord of life then even death cannot take away his glory. In him life will be stronger than death. And so, she wipes away the ointment with her hair and in that simple gesture we might even find a hint of the

possibility of resurrection, the unconquerability of life. Perhaps now she feels embarrassed by what she has done. Jesus reassures her – keep the rest of the ointment for his burial.

Nevertheless, what Mary has done remains important. She has hinted at the glory of the body which will hang on the cross and which will signify not only a tragic suffering but also glory. For if Jesus is the Lord of life then he is also the Lord of glory - the glory of God revealed in human beings fully alive, alive in such a way that death though it may mean pain and agony holds no fear. 'Whoever lives and believes in me shall never die' – that is never die without hope of something more.

And at this party in the gathering gloom Lazarus sits by Jesus, Martha serves him, and Mary lovingly wipes his feet with her hair. Between them they form the nucleus of the church, the church as it prepares itself for Holy Week. Lazarus, the symbol of hope for new life, Martha, the symbol of faith both serving and seeking understanding, and Mary the symbol of that love which sees into the heart of glory. Amen.

TUESDAY IN HOLY WEEK – CURBRIDGE 7.30PM

What became of the Greeks? Their presence at the beginning of our gospel reading is rather puzzling. We might describe them as Gentile tourists with an interest in Judaism. They have found themselves in the middle of a crowd of Jewish worshippers going up to Jerusalem, and they have heard rumours about Jesus. They seek out Philip – a disciple with a Greek name - and tell him that they wish to see Jesus. Philip goes with Andrew to tell Jesus but then the Greeks disappear from the story - so why were they mentioned at all?

Jesus has entered Jerusalem and people are flocking to see him so much so that the Pharisees complain bitterly that the whole world has gone after him. And then as it were right on cue, we hear of these Greeks who wish to see Jesus. They are representatives of the wider world, appearing in the story just as the Passion is about to begin. Earlier in the gospel Jesus had described himself as the shepherd who would lay down his life for his sheep. He also said that there were other sheep the disciples didn't know about who would join the flock. Perhaps those sheep have now arrived. Jesus has been approached by Gentiles wishing to see and perhaps to believe and to join in.

We might think of them as the equivalent of strangers who come into Church on a Sunday morning uncertain about what worship might involve but wanting to find out what the Church is really all about? What would you as a church want them to see and hear and understand? Perhaps this extract from John's gospel might help. So, what did these Greeks hear?

Jesus doesn't spend any time making them feel comfortable or welcome, though no doubt Philip had done his best to be friendly! Jesus, however, confronts these Greeks with some of the most challenging words of the Gospel:

'Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.' We might imagine both these Greeks and the stranger in our church saying, 'What on earth does that mean?'

How and why should we hate our lives – doesn't this border on madness? Scholars tell us that Semitic languages favour vivid and exaggerated contrasts to express preferences. The verb to love is not being used in the affectionate sense or as when we say I love ice cream, nor is the verb to hate being used as when a child might say 'I hate broccoli' or a manic depressive might hate his life. Nor does the life we are to hate mean what is good or beautiful in the world – but rather we are to hate the fearful and corrupt possibilities in this world that human sin has created. In such a fallen world we may love our lives because we want to hold on to everything that makes us feel secure. We are afraid to let go of our defences and we would prefer to hold onto our comforting illusions that prevent us from seeing the truth about the sinful world. But if we learn to hate, or reject such selfish and self-limiting patterns of behaviour, then we may

discover eternal life. We shall discover the life which transforms our relationships and gives us a vision of a world full of divine possibilities.

And yet to take that step and to accept vulnerability, is difficult and painful and deeply troubling as Jesus now admits - his soul is troubled. There is no story of the agony in the garden of Gethsemane in John's gospel - but this troubling of Jesus soul in the face of the hour that is upon him is the equivalent. Let this cup pass from me - Save me from this hour - it is the same acknowledgement of a natural human hesitancy. In the other gospels Jesus says, 'Not my will but thine be done.' Here he says, 'Father, glorify your name.'

If we want to know what divine glory looks like on earth, we should look for it in the meals and conversations, the healing and the care, the prayer and teaching, of Jesus' ministry. That is what the voice from heaven implies by saying, 'I have glorified it'. God's name has been glorified in Jesus' ministry just as the church's ministry should always seek to glorify God. And when the same heavenly voice also says, 'And I will glorify it again' it means all that is to follow in the death and resurrection of Jesus. What will look like defeat and failure on the cross is the beginning of the hour of glory in which Jesus will be lifted up from the earth. And by lifting up is meant both the raising of his body on the cross and also his going to the Father through resurrection.

The crowd fail to understand - they do not see any of this as relevant to their lives - it sounds like thunder or perhaps some private communication to Jesus. They have fixed views of the kind of leader who will save them and Jesus does not conform to their views. They do not want to hear about grains of wheat falling into the earth and dying, and only in this way bearing much fruit. They do not want a leader who accepts his own defeat.

And so back to the Greeks and to the strangers who might find themselves in our churches for the first time. We do not know what happened to the Greeks. Did they go home pondering Jesus' words and finding in them meaning for their lives? Were they impressed by the seriousness of the challenge which Jesus presented to them? Were they put off by its difficulty or did they find in Jesus hard words a new kind of love? That is still the challenge which faces the church today. This is a 'serious house on serious earth'. Jesus tells us that faith is costly, deeply challenging and demanding of self-sacrifice. Is that the message strangers hear in our churches? And if it is, might it speak to a hunger in them to be more serious*, to live more serious lives, and so become disciples of a Saviour who dies that we might truly live? Amen

* These quotations are taken from Philip Larkin's poem 'Church going'

WEDNESDAY OF HOLY WEEK 7.30PM ST MARY'S

I was too late to save him. That evening as I came down that quiet road outside Jerusalem, I saw the tree and the branch and the man hanging from it, and the body was still shaking in its death throws, and I rushed towards it, and I saw his face but when I got there, he was already dead. And I cut him down and buried him there, facing towards Jerusalem.

It was sometime before I found out who he was and what was said about him - there were many stories about him and I had no way of telling which was true and which was false.

The story I have put together is as ambiguous as the look I saw on his face as he saw me running towards him just before he died. I thought I saw surprise as though he had chosen a private place and did not expect anyone to pass that way; or did I see panic as though I was going to prevent him doing this to himself? And sometimes, I think perhaps, I saw hope as though he wanted me to cut him down and save him or, may be, that's all my imagination.

He was Judas, though I didn't know it at the time. I knew something about Jesus and his disciples though not their names; now of course their names are better known - and the last name on the list is always, 'Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him'; Judas Iscariot meaning that he came from

Kerioth, which is odd because Kerioth is in the south of Judea though all the other disciples seem to have come from the north, from Galilee. Perhaps he was always last in the list because he was the last to join when Jesus made one of his early journeys south to Jerusalem for a festival. Did Judas join after all the others had got to know each other, so that it always felt as though he didn't quite fit in, with his different southern accent?

But that's not enough to explain what he did; the stories I've heard say much more than that he didn't fit in. They say that he was dishonest, that he was a thief and that he used to look after the money people gave Jesus and appropriate some of it for himself. In the end he betrayed Jesus for money. And perhaps that's true, but it doesn't say much for Jesus' ability to see into men's hearts, to discern their character. Why would he choose a dishonest disciple? Others say that Jesus knew all along that Judas would betray him – but I don't like that idea. It makes it sound as though Jesus was using Judas to fulfil his destiny, as though Jesus wanted Judas to become a traitor. Still others say that Satan entered into Judas and made him do what he did. When I saw him die, I didn't look into the face of a man possessed by evil; but maybe no-one looks like that except in story books – no-one really shows in their face what's in their heart.

The last explanation I heard was that Jesus had somehow disappointed Judas – because Judas had expected him to lead a rebellion. And when that didn't look like happening, perhaps Judas believed that he could force Jesus to act by confronting him with the temple guards? Perhaps he hoped Jesus would summon legions of angels to defend himself, or by a miracle make the Romans go away and bring in the kingdom of peace? I suppose that could be true, but I'm not convinced.

There's so little to go on – and the rest hardly makes much sense. Apparently, Judas took the money back to the priests and tried to repent because he'd betrayed an innocent man. What made him think that? Perhaps he thought exactly the opposite of what I've just been saying. Far from wanting Jesus to rise up against the Romans, was he afraid of Jesus upsetting the status quo and bringing the wrath of Rome down on the Jewish people? And then, when he saw how meekly Jesus accepted his arrest and refused to defend himself, did Judas realise how wrong he'd been? I suppose that too could be true, but still I can't understand how having been with Jesus for several years Judas could have so misunderstood him. Surely all those conversations on the road, all the stories and the sayings which are beginning to circulate must have shown Judas what sort of man Jesus really was?

You might ask why I'm indulging in all this speculation? Why not just accept that Judas betrayed Jesus? Why is it that I can't accept that Judas was just an ordinarily bad man? He knew that the authorities wanted to get Jesus out of the public eye; he knew they were afraid of arresting Jesus publicly because some of the crowds were on his side and might have rioted. He knew the authorities needed to arrest Jesus quietly so he told them about the dark and quiet garden of Gethsemane. And to make sure they knew which man to arrest amid the shadows and the unsteady light of their torches, he went up to Jesus and named him Master and kissed him. Up to that point the story looks like a cheap and sneaky act of treachery for money – the act of just an ordinarily bad man – like all the men and women who convince themselves that what they're doing isn't really bad, in fact it might be for the best.

Why then do I want him not to be as bad as the stories make him out to be, really unforgivable? Is it that I don't like the idea of anyone being really unforgivable? Is it that I can't face up to the fact of evil in humanity and the justice of a God who ultimately rejects all such evil? Is it a kind of sentimentality that makes me want even Judas to be forgiven? They say Jesus forgave the men who nailed him to the cross, because they didn't know what they were doing but Judas knew what he was doing, didn't he? They say Jesus told Judas that it would have been better for him not to have been born. Did he say that out of sorrow for Judas, sorrow for what Judas had become? Perhaps that's what drove Judas to suicide – he did know what he had done and he found it unforgivable. If he had been a really bad man, he would have gone his way and spent the blood money without another thought.

I do wonder what Judas was looking for when he became a disciple. There are different stories about that moment when Judas greets Jesus with a kiss in Gethsemane. In one version Jesus says to him, 'Friend, why are you here?' Whenever Jesus asked a question, it was never as simple as it sounded. What do you want, what are you looking for, why are you here? They are such weighted questions when Jesus asks them. I wonder what Judas might have said at that moment in the garden when Jesus spoke to him. 'Why are you here?' It's a question Judas might often have asked himself in Jesus' company. Was he looking for a teacher, a guide and master, someone who would always be there for to protect him and tell him what to do? And in that last week in Jerusalem did he suddenly understand the awful freedom that Jesus meant for him to grow into, because Jesus was going to go away, he was going voluntarily to die? So then did Judas turn to the only other leader and teacher he was familiar with; to Caiaphas, the high priest and father of his people protecting them from the might of Rome. If Jesus wasn't the leader Judas wanted, then Caiaphas could take his place.

Perhaps in Gethsemane that kiss was one last frustrated plea for Jesus to make it all better; all because Judas couldn't say to Jesus, 'I'm here to follow you into the darkness of that final freedom of faith which will feel only like abandonment.' But none of the stories say that Judas gave any answer to that final question.

Now that I think again of the expression on Judas face as I ran towards him hanging from that tree, I'm reminded of one of the stories Jesus is said to have told. Might that story have been, in that moment, in Judas mind also? "And when he was yet a great way off, his Father saw him, and had compassion and ran, and fell on his neck and kissed him."

MAUNDY THURSDAY 7.30 HAILEY

History tells us many stories of knights in shining armour who went on quests in search of the chalice which Jesus used at the last supper. Even Monty Python and Indiana Jones have gone in search of the Holy Grail. I know of no stories, however, of such knights having gone in search of the holy wash bowl which Jesus used in washing the disciples' feet. This humble household object seems never to have been thought of as a possible relic in the same league as the holy grail, and yet, surely, it is just as precious.

A man about to die usually makes a will to make sure that his most treasured possessions go to those whom he loves most. Jesus has no possessions to leave, so first of all he leaves his disciples an example. He takes a jug of water and a bowl and a towel, and he washes their feet, and he says to them 'This example I have given you that you also should do as I have done to you.' It is a demonstration of the new commandment which he has also given them, to love one another as he has loved them.

To leave them an example is not, however, enough for Jesus. There has to be something more. There has to be a way in which he can also leave them himself, a way in which he can assure them of his lasting presence with them. So, he takes bread and blesses it because this is in some sense what we are made of; bread is food which we cannot do without - it is part of the material which God provides to make us what we are. In blessing the bread Jesus blesses our physical life - our flesh and blood which is his also. But then he breaks it. This is what human beings have so often done to their lives; we live broken lives. The lives God intends us to lead are broken by pride, injustice, greed, inequality, exploitation, prejudice, abuse, dishonesty and violence. Humanity is broken by sin, just as the body of Jesus will be broken by an abuse of power on the cross. But when the bread is broken it is not thrown away, neither is the dead body of Jesus. It is given into the hands of the weak, confused and failed disciples, just as the bread is given into our hands. And for all its brokenness and our brokenness, this bread, this body becomes for them and for us the bread of life, Christ's life in them and in us. 'Do this in memory of me.' Do this to receive in yourselves the new and reconciling life which rises triumphant out of sin and

brokenness for us and for our salvation. Take this bread which can transform our relationships with God and with one another.

Tonight, we begin our three-day meditation on the foundations of our faith, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And the starting point for this reflection are these two very simple acts; first a man kneeling on the floor washing the feet of his friends; and then a little later on, the same man taking and blessing bread and wine and sharing it with these friends. These are very simple intimate gestures. The man who does this did not have a manifesto to change the world; he did not have a detailed analysis of the human condition. All he had was a profound yet to us mysterious relationship with God, which spilled over into all his words and actions and relationships.

In the next few days as we explore the foundations of our faith, we have also to explore something of ourselves and all the relationships that make us what we are. Tonight, our celebration is, you see, not only about something that happened all that time ago it is about what is going on inside you and me at this moment. What God did for us then, he will do in us now. We are here to explore the mystery of our faith and the mystery of ourselves; the two must go together.

Being washed and being fed are our first experiences of being loved and cherished. In those very simple acts of attention given to her child by a mother our first relationship is born; but however good our early days may have been, there will always be things that don't go well because of the sins and failures which affect all our relationships, even the precious relationship between mother and child. On this night therefore Jesus washes and feeds his friends as the means whereby their learning to love may start afresh.

One of the most striking things said by Julian of Norwich is this: 'Jesus Christ therefore, who himself overcame evil with good, is our true Mother. We received our 'Being' from Him and this is where His Maternity starts. And with it comes the gentle Protection and Guard of Love which will never cease to surround us.'

This Eucharist and the baptism which admits us to it, are the places where like a mother Jesus washes and feeds us.

This washing and feeding has to be done this way because the underlying reality is too great for us. If we knew more clearly what could be happening to us here, we might be overwhelmed. In the water of baptism and in the bread and wine of the eucharist God accommodates his glory to our feeble capacity to receive him. But if in this eating and drinking we begin to feel a greater unity with those around us; if in this eating and drinking we feel some little part of our fears and self-concerns dropping away; if in this eating and drinking we are moved to acts of self-sacrifice, then something of God's glory is breaking through in us. In this way we become more really human with one another in the unity of the body of Christ.

A sixteenth century Catholic poet* used these words to describe what this sacrament meant to him; 'Live ever bread of loves, and be my life, my soul, my surer self to me.' How our communion in Christ can be 'My surer self to me' is what we are to discover as we move out of the Upper Room and on to Golgotha and the empty tomb.

*Richard Crashaw in his version of The Hymn of Saint Thomas (Aquinas) In adoration of the Holy Sacrament. Set to music in the Anthem 'Lo the full final sacrifice' by Gerald Finzi

GOOD FRIDAY 12.00 HAILEY

In our three reflections today, here and at St Mary's, I want to ask the question – what sort of community has this kind of story at its heart? Christianity and the church which proclaimed it, grew at first out of this one crucial week – this week shapes our faith. We see that in St Paul's letters, and we see it in all the Gospels which give a disproportionate amount of space to the last week of Jesus' life. And if we had time to look closely at Paul and the Gospel writers, we would see them wrestling with one particular problem – the problem of a crucified Messiah. Both St Paul and the Gospel writers have to respond to 'the shockingly urgent appeal of the cross to be understood' (Rowan Williams).

And that is the reason why this week in Jesus' life is so important. We are here so that we too can respond to the appeal of the cross for understanding. For the truth is that the problem of a crucified messiah challenges us with a radical understanding both of God and of human beings. So, in this talk I want to explore what the crucifixion says about us, and in the second talk what it says about God.

Imagine for a moment an early Christian missionary somewhere in Greece. He speaks eloquently about Jesus as having conquered death – he speaks about the new life we can have in the risen Christ. And then someone says the Greek equivalent of "Wow, that's amazing, but how did he die?" and there is a brief pause and the missionary says rather hesitantly – 'Well actually he was crucified.' There is a stunned silence, someone laughs, people begin to mutter and the crowd rapidly drifts away. Crucifixion was for rebels and traitors, not great teachers or leaders; it was the worst kind of death the Roman authorities could impose; anyone associated with a victim of crucifixion might be politically dangerous.

And yet that was what had happened to the man whose life led his followers to think of him as uniquely related to God, as God's most authoritative representative on earth. This was the man whose sense of being called by God and being loved by God was total. It was unique in the experience of those who knew him.

God's son gets crucified – how can that be possible – how can God let that happen?

And so, we can begin to see how strange it is that this story should lie at the heart of the Christian community – then and now.

We could now spend a great deal of time trying to discover why historically Jesus was crucified. We could look at the part played by his Jewish contemporaries and the reasons why the Jewish authorities thought Jesus was a threat to national security. We could look at the character of Pontius Pilate; on the surface he looks like a politician struggling to keep the peace, though we know from other sources that he was a cruel and politically inept governor who was eventually sacked for his brutality. We could look at the Gospels' use of Old Testament prophecies which their writers used to show that Jesus was living out a story hinted at, in the psalms and in Isaiah.

But none of that historical research would quite answer for us the question, why must we have such a story at the heart of our faith? The Roman historian Tacitus, referred to crucifixion as the extreme penalty. This penalty always began with scourging; the victim was then forced to carry the cross beam through the streets to the place of execution, accompanied by specialised teams of four soldiers and a centurion; on arrival the victim was stripped naked and his clothes given to the soldiers; the cross beam was attached to an upright, the nails were then hammered into the wrists and feet, and the cross raised and dropped into the hole prepared for it with a sickening thud; the helpless victim then took anything up to several days to die of exhaustion, asphyxiation, heart failure – death by public exposure and humiliation, after which the legs were often shattered, and in most cases the dead body was simply left to hang and rot there as a warning. Cicero said that this was 'a most cruel and disgusting punishment' and should be removed from 'a citizen's mind eyes and ears.' Clearly once seen never forgotten.

In a strange novel by Jill Paton Walsh called 'Knowledge of Angels', a young child is brought to a convent to be cared for, having been rescued from the mountains where she has been cared for by wolves. Very slowly she learns to dress and eat in a human way and to speak a little. When she has learnt to behave the nuns take her for the first time into their chapel. She admires a painting of St Jerome because it has a wolf in it. But as she is taken to the priest at the altar for a blessing, she sees something which makes her snarl and flee from the chapel on all fours. 'Bad place. I not go back in,' she says to the puzzled sisters. Some hours later the sister who looks after her is kneeling at the same altar. She looks up at the large painted crucifix above it and realises that what to her is an image of love must have seemed to the child like an image of a man viciously tortured and horribly done to death. What must the wolf child have thought of the nuns who kept such an image in the most important and holy place in their convent?

A stranger who knew nothing of Christianity might have the same reaction on entering any of our churches and seeing the image of this death from which we derive the word 'excruciating'.

How would we begin to explain why such an image is there?

We might start by saying to such a stranger that this image shows us the kind of world we live in. It is a world in which innocent men are crucified. And there is no hope for the world until we can acknowledge that, until we can acknowledge that our being human means being a part of such things. We cannot set ourselves apart from such a world, we cannot protest our personal innocence as though we had nothing to do with it. The cross is there to show us the truth about the world of suffering and the truth about our humanity which is capable of causing such suffering. If we believe that Jesus lives the life of God on earth is it so unthinkable that such a life should end in such a way? Is it so strange that the Son of God should be crucified?

In those parts of the world struggling with natural disasters, with civil war, with shortages of food and water, with the immediate consequences of environmental degradation, with crime, disease and persecution, with blatant inequalities of poverty and wealth, with inadequate social services, unemployment and homelessness, that question might not need to be asked. As Herbert McCabe puts it quite bluntly, 'Why naturally the man was crucified, aren't we all?'

That comment might at first strike us as rather melodramatic. Surely the world isn't that bad? What about all the good things, what about human goodness, what about all the things we enjoy and thank God for? Surely, we don't all have excruciating experiences? And yet, I think Good Friday profoundly challenges this view that the world is just a mixture of good and bad, where we should enjoy the former and try to overcome the latter. This day challenges us to think more deeply about how we view the good and bad in our humanity.

We need to take as our starting point our vision of the humanity of Jesus – the man for others, the man whose openness to God's love and whose openness to his fellow human beings meant that he held nothing back; he did not need to defend himself, he did not see himself in competition with others, he did not worry about how others saw him. The humanity of Jesus is difficult for us to contemplate simply because it represents a possibility we can scarcely glimpse. If Jesus is the human being fully alive then there is something deeply lacking in the way in which we live, lacking and dangerous.

We live in a society where popular commercialised culture and politics tends to distract us from the darker facts. We live in a culture which seems rarely to ask questions about the purpose and possibilities of our humanity. We live in a culture where the cross is often reduced to nothing more than a cheap piece of jewellery.

In front of the cross there is no place for triviality, lies or excuses; no place for evasion or escapist fantasies; here the suffering, loneliness and deprivation of individual human beings has to be acknowledged for what it truly is - a defiling of God's creation and a defeat for the purpose and possibility of our humanity.

What the creed requires us to believe then, is that Jesus is the son of God and that this happened to him. And paradoxically it is perhaps less difficult to believe that Jesus is God incarnate, because this happened to him. The Son of God truly reaches down into those depths we scarcely dare to explore and he shows us what we have made of our humanity. The cross resonates with the deeper humanity of which we are afraid. The cross unmasks the suffering we inflict upon each other. The cross provides the sign into which we can pour all our experience of anguish and torment. The cross enables us to face the painful truth of being human.

And so today we are bidden to listen carefully to St Paul when he says to the Corinthian community, 'I resolved to know nothing while I was with you, except Jesus Christ and him crucified.'

GOOD FRIDAY 2. HAILEY 12.30

We are today asking ourselves what kind of community tells itself this story, about a man dying on a cross? Why is the cross so important for us? In my first talk I tried to show what the cross tells us about what we have done to our humanity. We live in a world in which we should not be surprised by the fact that the man we call the Son of God, ends up on a cross. We tell the story of the crucifixion in a community which is not afraid to face up to the darkest features of our humanity. In this second talk I want to reflect on what the cross tells us about God. From the beginning Christians believed that what happens on the cross is for us. Jesus dies for us. God does something in and through the cross for us.

Explaining what God does for us on the cross has proved more difficult. Sometimes the cross has been seen as a place of sacrifice. Like the lambs which were sacrificed in the Temple, Jesus is also the lamb of God sacrificed for us. For us today, however, the idea of human sacrifice is difficult, to say the least. Of course, we can admire those who lay down their lives for others but that is usually in the context of war or accident. A soldier dies defusing a landmine. Someone drowns while rescuing a child. That is a sacrifice we can understand and admire. But it is hard for us to see how the crucifixion relates to such examples of self-sacrifice. What is the mechanism by which the cross can be said to rescue us?

Another explanation involves Jesus paying a price, as in the hymn, 'There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin.' And yet again we might find it hard to understand a God whose honour is so outraged by our sin that he has to create a good enough human being to make it up to him.

Yet another explanation sees Jesus as a ransom. We have in our sin sold ourselves to the devil and Jesus buys us back with his death; he is like the cost of ransoming a slave from his or her servitude. But again, that image comes from a culture which is no longer familiar to us.

These are, it has to be admitted, rather inadequate explanations of what is called the theory of atonement – the way in which the cross reconciles us to God. My point is simply that such theories are all based on a symbolic language which comes from past cultures and which has difficulty speaking to our culture.

So, to repeat our fundamental question what does the cross tell us about God? If as Christians have always said the cross shows to us the extent of God's love for us – how does it show us that?

In the creed we talk about Jesus as of 'one substance' or 'one being' with the Father, 'God from God, light from light, true God from true God.' And difficult as that may be for us to grasp it does lead us to say that on the cross God the Father is wholly identified with God the Son. As our last Archbishop Rowan Williams puts it, 'Unprotected human fleshliness is the appropriate embodiment of the selflessness of the divine.' The cross forces us therefore to rethink what we might mean by the power of God and also what we mean by the love of God.

The power of God is firstly creative. It brings life into being and it sustains all life. The power of God gives life – it is wholly gift. And secondly God is not to be seen as somehow dominant over humanity, his gift is not conditional. God's power is wholly and lovingly directed towards the realisation of our true humanity. And even when in our freedom we stand in the way of God's purpose, when we fail to live up to the possibilities of our humanity, God's love expresses itself re-creatively. He finds new ways of working with us. And on the cross we see the most profound way in which God sets about recreating us. Christ takes on absolute solidarity with human loss, human suffering, and human absence from God. Our liberation from untruth and sin is, paradoxically, brought about by God's total renunciation of power or advantage. God is put on trial and does not seek to justify himself in terms the world might understand. God does not seek to dominate, cajole, or manipulate us. In Holy week God shows us his total and unconditional availability for us, even in the most cruel kind of death. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer powerfully expressed it, 'God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us... not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his suffering.'

The foundational reality of God is self sharing even in the last place that we would look for God – on the cross. God holds nothing back in recreating humanity from within, which requires him to be with humanity in the depths of our vulnerable, guilty and desperate condition. So, Bonhoeffer again can say, 'There is no part of the world, no matter how lost, that has not been accepted by God in Jesus Christ and reconciled to God.'

Which takes us back to thinking about the nature of our humanity in the light of what God does for us on the cross. In the story of Adam and Eve the snake tempts them by promising them that when they eat the apple their eyes will be opened and they will be like God. The snake presents them with an idea of God who has a divine power unfairly withheld from human beings. The snake represents God as jealously protecting his power and authority. But then the snake says that, if Adam and Eve stand up to God, they will gain a power like his – a power to know the world as God knows it, and to dominate the world for their own well-being.

In a curious way, too complex to describe here, modern human beings, having rejected belief in God, have in many ways replicated the ambition of Adam and Eve to be like God. We have listened to the snake. We have as it were super-naturalised humanity in an attempt to free ourselves from frustration. We have put humankind at the centre of our world. And we have worked tirelessly to extend our power over nature, to use our increasing knowledge to dominate nature and to make ourselves invulnerable from all forms of attack, whether that be from other human beings or from disease and death. Not all knowledge is harmful of course, though even what seems good can sometimes have unintended harmful consequences. Nevertheless, as a result of our unlimited thirst for knowledge, our environment, both human and material has paid the price.

And yet as we look at the cross this Good Friday, we are shown that 'being like God' is not a question of power and domination and freedom from the constraints of being human. God's self-giving love even to the extent of self-abandonment on the cross shows us that to be truly human we have to give up a false idea of God and of ourselves. Only through our participation in that divine self-giving love will we become human in a godlike way.

We need, however not to overdramatise the nature of that participation. God is embodied in Jesus at a particular moment in history taking on all the constraints of ordinariness in that moment in Galilee. In the same way we have to learn in the ordinariness of our day what such self-giving love might mean in our relationships, in our work, in our use of natural resources and in the political life of our society. God's self-giving love has to become ordinary in every aspect of our daily life. Through the solidarity of Christ with suffering humanity, his church is drawn to the same solidarity. We come to accept that 'we are answerable not only for ourselves but for those whose lives are intertwined with ours in whatever degree.' (Rowan Williams) And what enables us to do that is our participation through word and sacrament in the love

displayed to us on the cross and made available to us in the life and worship of the Church. It is in the church which is his body, broken and risen for us that we can learn to sing the song of that unknown love, our Saviour's love to us, love to the loveless shown, that we might lovely be.
Amen

The quotations from Rowan Williams are taken from his recent book, 'Christ the Heart of Creation.'

GOOD FRIDAY 3 ST MARY'S 2.00PM

Towards the end of the Creed, we say 'We believe in the forgiveness of sins.' When you think about it, that is a rather odd thing to say in the same breath as we say that we believe in God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Surely forgiveness is something that is done, something God does for us, something we commit ourselves to doing, something we ask for? What does it mean to believe in the forgiveness of sins?

Firstly, the fact that this statement is there in the Creed at all, shows that belief in forgiveness is essential to our faith. Secondly by saying that we believe in forgiveness we are recognising that forgiveness is crucial to our well-being. And thirdly we are admitting that this process is something we have to learn about. Forgiveness is an integral part of faith seeking understanding.

But it might be said, surely, we know what forgiveness is? The perpetrator of some injury asks for forgiveness and the person so injured decides whether or not she can say, 'I forgive you.' And perhaps she is enabled to forgive by the perpetrator doing something that shows how sorry he is. He gives evidence of genuine repentance. In the same way, we ask God for forgiveness, and try to do something which will show that we are genuinely sorry.

Describing the process doesn't, however, help us understand what is really going on. Take for example someone barging into you in the street and failing to say, 'I'm sorry. You feel angry because the person has behaved as though you don't exist. He has implied that you don't matter, you mean nothing to him. And so, you react angrily, you reassert yourself. For reconciliation to take place you will have to admit you have been hurt and he to admit that he has been hurtful. For your humanity has been reduced by the hurt. However, it is also true that the person hurting you has also been reduced. To treat another person as though they don't exist denies there is a relatedness between you. And to deny relatedness reduces us as human beings. It implies we don't need each other. And where such relatedness has been broken it can only be restored by forgiveness and reconciliation.

As the soldiers drive the nails into Jesus' wrists and feet under the guidance of the centurion, Jesus prays, 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do.' This is a strange kind of forgiveness. All that we have said so far implies that forgiveness is dependent on a prior request for forgiveness, a recognition that something wrong has been done. There is no sign of the soldiers asking for Jesus' forgiveness. And yet what Jesus does here, he has done throughout his ministry. He forgives people when they haven't asked for it. And that forgiveness seems to act like grace, it brings about change in the person forgiven.

But now imagine a situation where Jesus forgives someone their sins and one of the people who has been sinned against, overhears. 'Wait a minute,' he says to Jesus, 'How can you forgive this man for what he did to me, I haven't forgiven him – he brought about the death of my wife – I can't forgive him and you can't forgive him on my behalf.'

And it is at this point that we might begin to see the difficulties in saying 'We believe in the forgiveness of sins.' What does the forgiveness going on in Jesus' ministry have to do with us, and how can that forgiveness apply to sins we might find unforgivable? We have thought this week about Judas and wondered whether even he might be forgiven, but does that mean that

we believe that someone like Hitler or Stalin, might be forgiven in the end? Surely only a victim of men like Hitler or Stalin has the right to answer that question?

On the cross God in Jesus identifies himself with all the suffering, pain and guilt of the world. God in Christ identifies himself with all victims. And in seeking also to forgive the soldiers who are nailing him to the cross, Jesus sees himself and his persecutors not as 'me' and 'them' but as 'us'. So might the perpetrators of suffering also be seen as victims, perhaps because their cruelty has come out of the reduction of their humanity. Perhaps they cause hurt because they have been hurt, or they live in a society where what they do is taken for granted. And so, in forgiving those who crucify him does Jesus open up the possibility of reconciliation and relationship with them as well? We cannot say for certain because we cannot see into the heart of God's final judgement.

Nevertheless, might we say finally that the forgiveness of Jesus, identifying himself with the suffering of all victims, is a word of power which lets loose in the world the grace of reconciliation. Jesus forgiveness is what makes forgiveness possible in the community of the forgiven. And such is the power of that grace it reaches out to those who find it hard to forgive others, to those who cannot forgive themselves, and to those who don't acknowledge that they need forgiveness.

As Jesus dies, the last word is spoken by the centurion who has overseen the crucifixion that day. It is unclear quite what he said, but as a Roman and a pagan he may well have said, 'Truly this was a god's son.' He had seen something of the divine in Jesus. And perhaps that was because he had heard Jesus forgiving those who crucified him, forgiving the centurion himself. The words of forgiveness had begun to work in his mind and to work in him a moment of recognition and grace, as we pray it will work in us today. Amen.

EASTER VIGIL HOLY SATURDAY, HOLY TRINITY 8.00PM

THESE WORDS SEEMED TO THEM AN IDLE TALE

The English language is an extraordinary thing; and perhaps we find learning other languages so difficult because it takes all our effort to learn our own. Take the word 'idle' for example. We probably think that word means 'inactive' or 'lazy' as in the curious phrase, 'bone idle'. But put the word 'idle' with the word 'tale' and what do we get? Surely a tale or story can't be inactive or lazy? But look back into the earlier history of our language and you find that the word 'idle' can also mean foolish or empty of meaning. So, the message that the women brought to the disciples on the first Easter morning, that Jesus was risen, seemed to the men just a story empty of meaning - an idle tale.

But what if, for a moment, we were to think of an idle tale as a lazy story? The opposite of a lazy story might be a lively or energetic story - a story that does a lot of work. A lazy story would then be one you didn't have to think much about; you might easily forget it; our newspapers can often contain just such lazy stories. But the opposite of an idle tale is one which can be told over and over again without our losing interest or becoming tired of it. An energetic story is one which does a lot of work in us. It shapes our lives in some way - it becomes a source of inspiration and guidance. An energetic story can bring people together into a community and harness the energies of that community and shape its life.

At first the disciples believed that the story of Jesus' rising was a tale without energy, a tale without substance, a pointless fiction. And yet...clearly even at the moment of its first telling it had a little energy. It made Peter dash out of the room to go and see for himself.

And so, the story began to grow, to take shape, to become more energetic. And more details were added to it - accounts of different disciples experiencing for themselves the effect of the risen Christ. The disciples began to be less afraid, they found an unexpected peace; Peter knew that he was forgiven for having denied Jesus. Doubting Thomas no longer doubted. The two

disciples on the road to Emmaus encountered Jesus in the breaking of bread. The disciples came to realise that Jesus ministry hadn't come to an end - it was to go on through them. They were to go out baptising and preaching, caught up in the energy of the story and letting it grow in power as it passed on through them.

Of course, sometimes the energy of the tale met an opposite force. When Paul took the story to Athens he met with scoffing and mockery; but some wanted to hear more and the story went on and on down the ages until it comes to this night and this church. In one part of the story the disciples are back on the Galilean hills where Jesus had often preached. And there they hear him telling them to take the story out to the world; those who want to go on listening to it are to be baptised in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, as Gary will be baptised in St Mary's tomorrow.

And yet...we have to admit that perhaps sometimes we might just wonder like the Athenians and the disciples when they first heard it, and later doubting Thomas - might this after all - be an idle tale? Is it a true story? Stories have a habit of growing; the different gospels grow different parts of the story; there are contradictions; it's not always clear what happened. What if they just wanted it to be true?

We can never know what we would have seen, if we ourselves had been part of the story at its beginning. All we can know is the power of the story for which men and women were prepared to give up their lives; a story by which lives were changed, new ways of living together were discovered, breaking down old boundaries, creating hope and courage and generosity and new meaning. We cannot deny that the energy of this story changed the world. And by being here tonight we are saying that we believe the story can have energy in our lives too; it can be creative of hope and courage and generosity and meaning in our lives too. Jesus can be risen in this community and the story will go on.

The body of Jesus is not in the tomb because the effect of his actual bodily life goes on in this living, loving, and believing community. We exist so that the work of Christ healing, serving, reconciling, and witnessing to the love of God goes on, in this place, as we live out the lively story of Christ risen.

EASTER DAY ST MARY'S 10.45

In a large public assembly hall in Moscow, a public lecture is being given by the Bolshevik Commissary for Popular Education. He is demonstrating to a large audience the obsolescence of Christianity. This religion, he says, is a product of the capitalist classes for the oppression of the poor. It is completely irrational, and can easily be shown to be without any factual basis. The lecturer is very eloquent and the lecture seems to have gone down well. Feeling confident, he invites discussion; anyone who wants to, can come up onto the platform, give his name and speak, though not for more than 5 minutes. A young priest - shy and awkward and clearly from a country parish - comes onto the platform. The lecturer, feeling sure that such a man cannot pose any problems, reminds him that he must only speak for five minutes; the priest assures him he won't need that long. He turns to the audience and says, 'Brothers and sisters: Christ is risen!' And with one voice the audience responds, 'He is risen indeed'. The priest leaves the platform and the meeting is at once called to a halt.

That story from the 1920s speaks powerfully of a faith which cannot be suppressed. It demonstrates the putting down of the mighty and the exaltation of the humble and meek. It reveals the church as an Easter people - in whom Christ is risen. During the early years of Russian Communism thousands of churches and monasteries were taken over by the government and either destroyed or converted to secular use. No new churches could be built. Orthodox priests and believers were variously tortured, sent to prison camps, labour camps or mental hospitals, or executed. And yet the Church survived.

The brave, young village priest in the Moscow assembly hall used the acclamation which we used at the start of this service. 'Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.' He did not seek to argue with the lecturer and try to prove him wrong. He used instead the power of a communal faith and tradition. He appealed to the experience of the audience who since their childhood would have attended the Easter services, joined in the Easter songs, given the Easter greeting to their family, their friends and neighbours. You might say that all their Easters had prepared them beforehand for this one courageous yet dangerous demonstration of their faith. In the same way Bonhoeffer speaks of a girl in her early teens going with her Bible class to a Christian camp during the Easter holidays in Nazi Germany. She goes into the meeting hall where they are gathering for their first session and sees a portrait of Hitler on the wall. Immediately she walks up to it, takes it down and puts it away in a cupboard. A brave action for someone of her age, yet we might say she was prepared beforehand for what she did by the renewal of hope at Easter, the assurance of sins forgiven, the glimpse of joy and glory. She knew something of what the disciples knew, as the story of Christ rising unfolded on that first Easter morning.

In listening to Mary Magdalen's part in that story this morning, we might picture for ourselves the rapid changes in her emotions. The desolation brought about by Jesus' death, her anger that his body might have been removed, her puzzlement with this figure she takes to be a gardener, the joy of recognising Jesus, her need to prolong the moment, the fear that she must take this unbelievable news to the disciples. We might be able to identify with at least some of those emotions. But then again, we might ask questions.

Do we wonder why Mary Magdalen doesn't recognise Jesus straight away? Do we want to know what resurrection involves? What sort of body does Jesus have or is this some kind of vision?

Or finally, might we approach this story wondering about its implications for us? Though we may not understand what a risen, glorified body might actually be like, this story is the basis of our belief in a future resurrection for ourselves and those whom we have loved who have died. We will be raised as Jesus was raised to live a life outside time in the presence of God. Though we cannot now comprehend such a life, this story prepares us beforehand to approach our own death as a gateway to new life.

On Good Friday I asked what kind of community tells this kind of story – the story of Holy Week? The answer to that question for today is that this should be a community that enters emotionally and spiritually into the story; a community that is not afraid to ask hard questions of the story; and a community that can look death in the face with hope. And finally, this should be a community that is able to live the story in the present, as that Orthodox community was living it in the lecture hall in Moscow.

If you come to church this morning having just heard some very bad news; if you come deeply worried about someone or struggling with a crisis in your own life; if you come with a passionate concern about particular issues in our world; if you come bearing the same old burdens that are always with you and which only seem to get heavier; if you come seeking baptism or renewing the vows made at your baptism, the truth of the story we tell today must be true for your circumstances too. Christ is risen today in your life. Christ is risen in you to be the strength you need, Christ is risen to be the power of prayer in you, to be the comfort and support you need from other people; Christ is risen to be in you the courage to do something that will make a difference.

When the Russian priest spoke to that audience, they responded with the words 'Voistinu voscres' which means not quite the same as our 'He is risen indeed.' It means, 'He is truly risen'. And in speaking thus to the Commissar for popular education they were asserting the real, actual, eternal, truth of their faith. And even the arguments of a Commissar of education cannot stand up to the faith of a people who believe in the Resurrection because Christ is risen in us and in our lives. Amen.