

Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 17th April 2022, Easter Day

Readings: **Isaiah 65:17-25**
Acts 10:34-43

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

Since last Easter many things have happened in my life and yours, and many things have changed in the life of the world. Consequently this year's Holy Week readings may have resonated differently. What could the Easter story mean for you and me; the society we live in; and even the world?

On Maundy Thursday we remembered Jesus sharing a last meal with friends, breaking bread and sharing wine, and Jesus commanding all present – then and now – to love. Those words 'whenever you do this, remember me' echo through time and I don't think their implication is limited to what we do in church. 'Remember me' not only in bread broken in church at communion, but also in food shared at home and in restaurants. Gratitude and blessing and intimacy with God not only in the chapel but in the midst of everyday.

The foot-washing on that Thursday service is always a moving thing – the vulnerability of giving one's feet into another's hands, and the humility of washing the feet of another person. Foot washing was a very familiar part of life in the ancient world, usually allocated to the least important slave, but it feels strange and exotic in a world that has surfaced roads, and shoes to protect our feet. What would be a familiar activity that could speak more readily?

A particular sports team may be able to help us in this! Most of us would know that the New Zealand All Blacks are the most successful Rugby Union team in the world, having won seventy five percent of their international games over the last one hundred years. What is less known is that after each game, the team closes the doors and together sweep and tidy their changing room!

James Kerr explains in his book, 'Legacy' – that humility and discipline help to shape All Black culture and character, and it's a refreshing insight and I think it is a contemporary expression of foot-washing. As we consider this we might helpfully ask ourselves, how we serve others without seeking financial reward, or social credit?

In the rhythm of Holy Week there can then be a prayer vigil throughout Thursday night in which there is the gift of silence and stillness, and the opportunity to be a little disorientated. Unless we're shift workers there is a fair chance that we're used to having a rhythm of sleep and wakefulness and the vigil invites us to interrupt this, just for a night.

Through participating we may have felt sleepy and found new empathy for the disciples who were unable to stay awake in the long ago Garden of Gethsemene.

However, the night vigil primes people for the grim marathon of Good Friday. A liturgical marathon in which there are long readings about false accusation, mob fury, unjust trial, torture, and painful death. Some parishes put a large cross in the front of the church, have nails and hammers, and a crown of thorns... and sometimes that crown is made from barbed wire. At some stage the cross might be laid down under a shroud with the invitation then for those present to scatter rose petals and rosemary leaves upon it, before leaving in silence. On Good Friday we have opportunity to think about the things we've done, or have not done, that have diminished life for others... and, if we are open to it, we recognise that most of us are culpable for something in a world that knows much brokenness.

Back in the day, public flogging and crucifixion was regularly used by the Roman Empire to keep law and order through fear but, surely, we now live in a more civilised era? We have international agreements about human rights, and yet the ongoing war in Ukraine would suggest otherwise. The indiscriminate bombing of apartment buildings in Kyiv and Mariupol over the last few months... suggest otherwise. The torture and execution of civilians in Bucha, revealed in recent weeks... suggest otherwise.

Although this war dominates our current news cycle, and there is a collective anxiety about what might happen next, there has been bloody conflict going on in many places for years. So, we rightly pray for the blessing of peace in Ukraine, but also pray for peace in South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories...

Maybe our time, and our society, is not as 'civilised' as we like to think? And, maybe justice and flourishing can only be for some people in the world, but not for all? If that thought is uncomfortable – then that's good! It makes me profoundly uncomfortable! However, I think *uncomfortable; angry; grieving; despairing; and, impotent...* are Good Friday feelings because on Good Friday it seemed that injustice and self-interest had prevailed. Put more directly, on Good Friday it seemed that 'the bad guys' had won!

Holy Saturday is a time of waiting... in some ways we suspend our knowledge about what happened next and we metaphorically sit in ashes and wait like Job. It's helpful to have that remembrance of the time Jesus was sealed in a tomb... before something new emerged; before transformation; before resurrection new life.

John's Gospel tells us that Mary didn't recognise the resurrected Jesus until he called her by name... and there is a gift for us in this. For God will and does bring new life to us, to our society, and to the world... but, we often fail to recognise it. To be fair it normally takes

longer than three days to become clear... and sometimes we do not live long enough to see it! 'Though there are always signs of hope I think it will take generations for resurrection new life to become clear for the people of Ukraine because so much has been destroyed, and so much life has been lost.

The Gospel tells us that Mary was subsequently sent to tell others that death had been transformed into life; that an ending had become a beginning; and that God can change despair into joy.

Surely this is part of the faith we share, and it can give hope to an individual that struggles to see a way forward; a society that is divided; and a world that is threatened by greed...

It is Good News that we are called to share in our words and offer to the world in the way we live our lives. In God's grace may hear Good News; share Good News; and be Good News!

Friends - the Lord is risen! **Alleluia!**

He is risen indeed! **Alleluia!**

Let's pray:

Holy God, we give thanks for the mystery and gift of resurrection.

We give thanks for the gift of our own lives and ask for the grace to share your Good News and your love through our lives wherever we find ourselves.

In the midst of our joy, we remember and ask you to bless and sustain the people of Ukraine. We ask in the name of Jesus the risen Christ. Amen.