

THE PARISH OF HANDSWORTH
THE CHURCH OF ST MARY



Holy Week 2021

**Devotional Reflections
based on
Mark's Gospel**

The Rev'd Dr Robert Stephen, Rector of Handsworth

As we have moved through Lent this year there has always been uncertainty about whether or not we would be able to mark Holy Week in the ordinary way with a daily Eucharist leading to the drama of Maundy Thursday and the re-enactment of Jesus washing the Disciples feet and the Vigil spent with the Sacrament reserved for the solemn marking of Good Friday, where no Sacraments are valid and yet grace is received in the bread from the Vigil. This cannot be done and neither can the moving around the Church for the marking of the Stations of the Cross, reminiscent of the jostling crowds on the way to the Cross, straining to see and be part of the events, is impossible (something that hasn't happened yet in the reordered Church).

The fact that these Devotional Reflections will replace these events isn't overly important. What matters as we take time to think about the events of that first Holy Week is that we take time to journey with Jesus: not rushing ahead of him, but taking the week at his pace. Of course, we know the end of the story, but we don't anticipate it too much: in spending time with Jesus, we learn about him and about ourselves. So, we will reflect on what the events on each day teach us about ourselves.

In 2020, we focused on the Readings set for the Daily Eucharist. This year we shall restrict ourselves to the narrative in Mark's Gospel, commonly accepted as the most basic of the Gospels and perhaps the earliest of the written Gospels (as well as being the controlling Gospel for this year).

Palm Sunday – 28th March 2021

Mark 14:1-11 – Self-Centeredness

It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus^{jd} by stealth and kill him;² for they said, “Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.”

The Anointing at Bethany

³ While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper^l as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. ⁴ But some were there who said to one another in anger, “Why was the ointment wasted in this way?² ⁵ For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.” And they scolded her. ⁶ But Jesus said, “Let her alone; why do you trouble her?² She has performed a good service for me. ⁷ For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. ⁸ She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. ⁹ Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

Self-centredness is as sin. When we act as if the universe revolves around us and that everyone and everything else should respond accordingly; when we believe that our opinion should be heard before and above all others; when we are convinced that what we do is right ignoring the effect on others; then we are, beyond doubt, self-centred. Most of us try to be less obvious and a little more subtle, but we deceive ourselves if we deny it.

In this passage from Marks' Gospel, we see the effects of the self-centredness of those who surrounded Jesus on his way to the cross.

The first encounter with self-centredness is in the Chief Priest and the Scribes. They wanted rid of Jesus but wanted it to happen in such a way that it didn't reflect badly on them and wouldn't cause any trouble in Jerusalem. This was, of course, party time in Jerusalem. The Feast of Passover was one of the three great Festivals in Judaism and every adult Jew would want to spend at least one Passover in Jerusalem: to this day, Jews in the Diaspora end the Passover with the declaration, 'Next year in Jerusalem!' In the first century records show that over 3 million would descend on Jerusalem with over 250,000 lambs being killed for the Feast. The Feast of Unleavened Bread was the seven days that followed Passover. The tension in Jerusalem was heightened because the parallels between the Hebrews being freed from Egyptian oppression and the Roman occupation and oppression that surrounded the people in the city. That made the Jewish authorities nervous because they had to tread that line that showed to the faithful their opposition to Rome and showed to Rome a deference that allowed them freedom to do what they needed to. Their self-centredness led to compromises without integrity.

To what extent do we see ourselves in the self-centredness of the Chief Priest and the Scribes – of wanting to do what suits us and not be noticed when we do it? That adds a weight to the cross that Jesus carries to Calvary.

The second encounter with self-centredness is in Judas. It is clear that he lacked generosity in that, when Nard was lavished on Jesus, he saw the waste of an annual wage of a working person. It is clear that he is ambitious and that, when he became a disciple, he saw in Jesus the one in whom he ambitions would be realised. There are those who think that he didn't betray Jesus to destroy him but that he wanted to force his hand to

act: when Jesus didn't immediately overthrow the authorities, Judas then commits suicide. Judas wasn't content with the path that Jesus had chosen but wanted him to be the Jesus he needed him to be.

Our self-centredness is often guilty of the same sin – of being disappointed in Jesus as he is and not the Jesus we need him to be.

In contrast to this, Mark records the anointing at Bethany. Here, is an act of love. Whether or not the woman knew that this was an anointing for burial is irrelevant – it is the act of love that matters. This isn't the time to discuss whether this is the same event as Mary Magdalen anointing Jesus feet with perfume and wiping them with her hair. What we need to hold in mind is the selflessness of the act. It is extravagant, reckless and impulsive and it is appreciated by Jesus. I noticed afresh this year that Jesus said, **what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.**

Through Holy Week we become increasingly aware of the selflessness of Jesus in each step towards the cross and equally aware that it is our self-centredness that makes each step necessary. We have no part in the work of the cross, but we are able to replicate the selflessness of the woman who anointed Jesus.

THE 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

Monday in Holy Week – 29th March 2021
Mark 14:32-42 – Priorities

Jesus Prays in Gethsemane

³² They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” ³³ He took with him Peter and James and John and began to be distressed and agitated. ³⁴ And he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.” ³⁵ And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. ³⁶ He said, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.” ³⁷ He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? ³⁸ Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” ³⁹ And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. ⁴⁰ And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him. ⁴¹ He came a third time and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴² Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.”

How difficult it is to embrace God's priorities when they are not our own. As, today, we linger in Gethsemane, we learn a little bit about the priorities in Holy Week. These are the quiet days before the frenetic activity once darkness falls on Thursday with the trauma that will follow on the Friday morning. These are the days of hesitation before the dawn of hope on Easter Day.

Jesus, fully aware of what awaits him makes a priority of seeking out human companionship and the unique consolation that there would be in spending time with his Father. Unusually, we learn that Jesus is distressed and agitated and admits that to the three, Peter, James and John, who are with him that **I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here and keep awake**. But that appeal from Jesus is not enough. Surely, this unique confession of need from the one that they had got to know closely over three years should have triggered a positive response. How often had he ever asked anything of them other than the simple invitation to 'follow me'.

However well-intentioned these Disciples might have been the mixture of the roast lamb, the spiritual engagement with the Last Supper and, not least, the four cups of wine that are an essential part of the Passover Supper change the perception about what is important. Sleep takes hold, despite what Jesus had asked of them. Not just once, but twice, Jesus comes back and finds that those from whom he sought some solace had given in to the temptation to have a sleep. Jesus is indulgent to the weakness of his friends when he says, 'the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.'

Do we recognise that in ourselves – of prioritising what we think is important over what God says is necessary? How sensitive are we to that specific and special invitation that God gives to share in what is important to him? How often in our lives have we found ourselves, along with the disciples, being in the position of not knowing what to say when we are embarrassed because of what we have failed to do?

I confess that it feels as if we are intruding when we are allowed to share in the private exchange between Jesus and his Father. He may have *wanted* company, but he *needed* this time with God. In it, Jesus in this passionate exchange with his Father, checks that this is what needs to happen. It is a model of prayer – of stating clearly what we might want,

but accepting that we are not, that we should not, be in charge. Jesus acknowledges that 'all things are possible' for his Father, but that what is possible isn't always what is best. If any evidence were ever needed for the real humanity of Jesus it is in his hesitation to go willingly through torture to execution.

How easily, under cover of darkness on the Mount of Olives, Jesus could have slipped away and, at least temporarily, avoided capture. Yet when he says, 'Get up, let us be going', the priority of doing what was necessary to atone for sin wins through and Jesus goes *to* his fate rather than running *away* from it.

Had we been in the garden on the Mount of Olives, what would we have done? Jesus' invitation to be there for him is still there. History teaches us that he made us his priority as he moved towards his arrest. Perhaps time for us all to stay awake.

THE 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

Tuesday in Holy Week – 30th March 2021

Mark 14:43-72 – Reverse Blasphemy

The Betrayal and Arrest of Jesus

⁴³ Immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. ⁴⁴ Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard.” ⁴⁵ So when he came, he went up to him at once and said, “Rabbi!” and kissed him. ⁴⁶ Then they laid hands on him and arrested him. ⁴⁷ But one of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. ⁴⁸ Then Jesus said to them, “Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? ⁴⁹ Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled.” ⁵⁰ All of them deserted him and fled.

⁵¹ A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, ⁵² but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.

Jesus before the Council

⁵³ They took Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes were assembled. ⁵⁴ Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the guards, warming himself at the fire. ⁵⁵ Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none. ⁵⁶ For many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree. ⁵⁷ Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying, ⁵⁸ “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.’” ⁵⁹ But even on this point their testimony did not agree. ⁶⁰ Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, “Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?” ⁶¹ But he was silent and did not answer. Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Messiah,^U the Son of the Blessed One?” ⁶² Jesus said, “I am; and ‘you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power,’ and ‘coming with the clouds of heaven.’”

⁶³ Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “Why do we still need witnesses? ⁶⁴ You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?” All of them condemned him as deserving death. ⁶⁵ Some began to spit on him, to

blindfold him, and to strike him, saying to him, "Prophesy!" The guards also took him over and beat him.

Peter Denies Jesus

⁶⁶ While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came by. ⁶⁷ When she saw Peter warming himself, she stared at him and said, "You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth." ⁶⁸ But he denied it, saying, "I do not know or understand what you are talking about." And he went out into the forecourt. ⁶⁹ Then the cock crowed. ⁷⁰ And the servant-girl, on seeing him, began again to say to the bystanders, "This man is one of them." ⁷¹ But again he denied it. Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, "Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean." ⁷² But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, "I do not know this man you are talking about." At that moment the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, "Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." And he broke down and wept.

What, in God's name, was going on when Jesus was arrested. By the end of the night, Jesus had given them what they wanted: the evidence for blasphemy. But the Sanhedrin, the 71 Sadducees, Pharisees, Scribes and Elders, couldn't act in God's name. Even if the charge of blasphemy mattered to the Roman authorities – and it didn't – nothing could change the fact that even the Sanhedrin didn't have the authority to put anyone to death: that power belonged to the Governor.

All of this is much later. We must begin with the betrayal and the arrest before the pre-trial hearing.

What went through Judas's mind when he went to kiss Jesus? This was a premeditated, purposeful and deliberate act of betrayal. Was it the money? That mattered to him. Was it the hope that he would force Jesus to act and that he would witness some great act that in an instant overthrew the invading powers? It is difficult to dismiss this kiss as the Greek makes it clear that this isn't a casual peck on the cheek, but it was a sustained, intense kiss. It was certainly more than would have been necessary to identify Jesus to the Sanhedrin Police and the crowd that they seemed to have dragged with them, armed and eager for an encounter. Whatever it was, amidst the chaos of the mob and the futile attempt to fight back (probably Peter, impetuous as ever). Costing a servant his ear, Jesus stands at the centre of it all. As quickly as it had started it was done and Jesus was arrested and young Mark runs away minus his clothing.

There were rules about trials. They had to be in the Hall of Hewn Stone at the Temple (or else the verdict was invalid); the Sanhedrin was forbidden from meeting at night; witnesses had to be heard and the detail examined and agreed; each member, starting with the youngest and ending with the oldest, had to stand and give their verdict; if the verdict was death the Sanhedrin had to 'sleep on it' to allow room for mercy. If this religious court was acting in God's name they broke every rule in their own book. That's before we get to the witnesses giving false testimony and not even being able to get that right.

Again, in the midst of this Jesus stands: an oasis of calm amidst the chaos of rage. It is he who confesses to being the Messiah, fully aware that this would release the passion and the barely concealed hatred of these men of God, of these leaders of the Temple and community. The spitting, the

blindfolding, the whipping and the invitation to 'prophecy' knowing full well that there was nothing that he would say that they would listen to.

Where do we see ourselves amid all of this? Do we think that we are above the betrayal or that we are different to the frenzy when victory was within reach, even though that victory meant death? Who wasn't shocked when the US Senate was overtaken by a mob? People like you and me wound up, pointed in a direction and sprung-loaded with righteous anger. It just takes the right catalyst for that which is within us to be ignited. God knows that and that adds weight to the cross Jesus carried and to the heaviness of his heart weighed down with our sin.

Where does Peter fit with all of this? To most he is there, ready to deny Jesus whenever he was asked? Yet, he was there. The others had deserted and fled. He should have. As soon as the servant girl asked if he was with Jesus, Peter should have got away from that courtyard. It wasn't safe for him to be there. The fact that he had the courage to remain shouldn't be entirely eclipsed by his denials of Jesus. What he thought he could do against 71 of the Sanhedrin, their guards and servants, heaven only knows. As Mark, writing the earliest of the Gospels, retells Peter's story, here is Peter saying, 'It was me: I did it: I betrayed Jesus.'

It was me. The reverse blasphemy that thinks it wasn't does us no credit at all. We know ourselves to be in the scheming, in the mob and in in the denials. Yet, Jesus stands calm, with clear purpose, that we do not pay the penalty and he stands charged.

THE 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

Wednesday in Holy Week – 31st March 2021

Mark 15:1-20 – Dignity

As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. ² Pilate asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” He answered him, “You say so.” ³ Then the chief priests accused him of many things. ⁴ Pilate asked him again, “Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.” ⁵ But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

Pilate Hands Jesus over to Be Crucified

⁶ Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. ⁷ Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. ⁸ So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. ⁹ Then he answered them, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?” ¹⁰ For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. ¹¹ But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. ¹² Pilate spoke to them again, “Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?” ¹³ They shouted back, “Crucify him!” ¹⁴ Pilate asked them, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Crucify him!” ¹⁵ So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

The Soldiers Mock Jesus

¹⁶ Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor’s headquarters!); and they called together the whole cohort. ¹⁷ And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. ¹⁸ And they began saluting him, “Hail, King of the Jews!” ¹⁹ They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. ²⁰ After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

How do you remain calm and retain your dignity when so many people are complicit in a lie? The Sanhedrin knew it was perpetrating a lie; Pilate knew it was a lie; Jesus knew it was a lie. Yet, the lie prevails.

Behind the lies were complicated and undignified motives. Pilate knew that he was being set up, but his fear of Rome and of the people of Judea compromised him: he wanted to survive and he wanted to be promoted out of this 'hell-hole' of a posting. He would do what he wanted. We are told by Mark that Pilate recognised that the Sanhedrin are jealous of Jesus. They have accused Jesus of treason and that was a trump card – Pilate could not be seen to ignore that and there was only one punishment. If we were to think about this for any length of time, we become aware that Jesus is accused of being exactly who he claimed to be by people who are, by their actions, much less than they should have been. It seems that the crowd (if it can be called a crowd in a space that accommodated around 30 people) are there by accident. This isn't the crowd that welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem: they haven't changed their mind; they just aren't there. This is a group of people, aware of the tradition of releasing a prisoner, who have come to get Barabbas. They may not have been aware that they were choosing hate over love and war over peace, they simply wanted the man they came for whatever he had done. They were indifferent to Jesus; he didn't matter to them.

Jesus, alone, has a quiet dignity. Pilate asks, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus simply replies, 'You say so.' After that, Jesus is silent. Silence in the face of things we don't want to be happening can arise out of contempt, or fear, of hurt or of grief. All of those things could have been present in Jesus, but his is a dignified silence in the face of a fate he has already embraced and a purpose in the redemption of humanity that his mind focused beyond the clamour of the ambitions of the unlikely gathering united in an undignified purpose. The impatience of the crowd in wanting to get to Barabbas means that they just want Jesus out of the way – 'Crucify Him!' It's what you are going to do anyway. Get on with it and we can get on with the day we planned.

It still happens. We cannot have the walk of witness carrying the crude wooden cross this year: it is such a pity as that simple, visual intrusion into Good Friday is a powerful testimony. Yet, every year, some will get impatient as we impede their over-fast progress in their cars and they will sound the horn, shout and even become abusive. It is nothing compared

to what Jesus endured, but it a reminder of the indignity at the heart of Good Friday.

Scourging was common-place and the flogging with a leather whip, with sharp pieces of lead and bone embedded into the lash, was so effective that it was not unusual for the condemned not to survive to be crucified. Then came the waiting – the sentence had been passed and things had to be prepared. A condemned man deserved no respect and was shown none. He was fair game for the soldiers who picked up where the trial left off. A King! What does a king need? Purple- the colour of privilege – and then a crown. The creativity that uses thorns, beaten onto Jesus' head using a reed sceptre, is genius. You can imagine how much laughter there must have been as they knelt in mock homage. Then it was time to go and the purple robe is exchanged for Jesus' own clothes and the indignity continues. The soldiers are guilty of cruelty, but there would be no malice. Jesus was fair game to them, their sport making the messy business of being a Roman executioner in a foreign land, bearable.

In the contrasts of lies and truth; hate and love; cruelty and compassion: where do we find ourselves. The choice to abandon indignity and to embrace dignity can, as we have seen, be very costly.

Maundy Thursday – 1st April 2021

Mark 14:12-31 – Feet not Hands

¹² On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples said to him, “Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?”¹³ So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, “Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him,¹⁴ and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, ‘The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’¹⁵ He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.”¹⁶ So the disciples set out and went to the city and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal.¹⁷ When it was evening, he came with the twelve.¹⁸ And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.”¹⁹ They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, “Surely, not I?”²⁰ He said to them, “It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the bowl^l with me.”²¹ For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.”

The Institution of the Lord’s Supper

²² While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, “Take; this is my body.”²³ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it.²⁴ He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.”²⁵ Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”

Peter’s Denial Foretold

²⁶ When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.²⁷ And Jesus said to them, “You will all become deserters; for it is written, I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’

²⁸ But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.”²⁹ Peter said to him, “Even though all become deserters, I will not.”³⁰ Jesus said to him, “Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.”³¹ But he said vehemently, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And all of them said the same.

Allow me one irreverent thought before we proceed to the Reflection proper. I was reminded that the Greek word used for the Upper Room is *καταλυμα* (kataluma) is the same word that Luke uses in Luke 27 and has evolved, in the English translation, to be the 'Inn' in which there was, of course, no room. Imagine if they had been consistent in their translation and we had come to believe that the Last Supper was believed to have been in the Pub! Sadly, the Upper Room is the more accurate translation.

The first thing that is obvious from the text is that all of this has been prepared. It has been prepared by God outside of time, but it has also been meticulously prepared by Jesus. Men didn't carry water from the well so it would not have been difficult to spot a man carrying a water jar. Doubtless, too, someone would have stood in the Temple amongst the 1,000's in line for the Priests-cum-butchers who cut the lambs throat, removed the blood, entrails and the fat and offered the blood on the altar before giving the carcass, head, feet and tail still attached, to take home for the lamb roast. The Passover was the great Feast of freedom and liberation. At the first Passover there was the threat of death, the need for urgency and a readiness to move. At this Passover the rules had changed so that the participants reclined, a symbol of the fact that they were now living in the Promised Land and a people who were, in their hearts at least, free and at liberty. God did it – and that is excuse enough for a party.

Jesus made the Feast his own. It was part of the Feast that everyone had their hands washed but Jesus washes their feet (something that Mark doesn't record), beyond even the duty expected of a slave. We never give in to the temptation for ease and wash hands in this great Liturgy as the only hands washed during the Passion were those belonging to Pilate: that is an association that only a very few of us would ever want to be associated with. The bread, broken with small pieces as a reminder of the Bread of Affliction eaten by the Hebrews, was literally made his own: this is my body. Jesus, uniquely, inhabits the bread then as he does now.

The theology behind this is all about the blood of Old Covenant and the New Covenant that is to supersede it. No longer are people held under the law but are held within love, God's love. The fullest expression of that is in the death of Jesus, the Pascal Lamb, slain for our forgiveness and in whose death we find freedom and liberation. This is my blood of the Covenant, shared then and now, pointing forward and back to the cross.

Two shadows are cast over the celebration of freedom, cast by Judas and Peter. In Judas it was a coldness, yet in Peter it was the heat of the moment.

Judas has already abandoned Jesus and Jesus knows this without the other disciples being aware of it. Judas must have joined in fully to have escaped notice and must have rankled when Jesus says it would have been better if he had never been born. He exercises his freedom by bringing destruction; he responds to love by choosing betrayal. Judas will always be a challenge to those who come after him; how do we use our freedom? Of course, Jesus could have stopped him, but didn't as this was all planned.

After they had sung Psalm 136, 'O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures for ever', Peter – speaking for all the disciples and principally for himself – rejects the idea that they will be deserters. He is told that he will deny Jesus three times. His heart was in the right place, but he underestimated his own need for self-preservation and his own fallibility. How many of us know that same contradiction within ourselves: what we want to be and do set against what we actually are and what we end up doing?

Even so, the theme of liberation and hope pervades. Whatever trauma this night and the morning might hold, Jesus looks beyond it to the time that will come when he, with us, will drink with us in God's kingdom. God hasn't washed his hands of us but, in Christ, does what is necessary for our liberation. This freedom can never be repressed by occupying powers nor by the shadow cast by our fallibility. It is sure and certain.

POST COMMUNION PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, we thank you that in this wonderful sacrament you have given us the memorial of your passion: grant us so to reverence the sacred mysteries of- your body and blood that we may know within ourselves and show forth in our lives the fruit of your redemption, for you are alive and reign, now and for ever. **Amen**

Good Friday – 2nd April 2021

Mark 15:21-47 – Save yourself

The Crucifixion of Jesus

²¹ They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. ²² Then they brought Jesus^{jd} to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). ²³ And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. ²⁴ And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

²⁵ It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. ²⁶ The inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." ²⁷ And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. ²⁸ Those who passed by derided^{jd} him, shaking their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, ²⁹ save yourself, and come down from the cross!" ³¹ In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. ³² Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

The Death of Jesus

³³ When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ³⁴ At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ³⁵ When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." ³⁶ And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." ³⁷ Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. ³⁸ And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. ³⁹ Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

⁴⁰ There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. ⁴¹ These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

The Burial of Jesus

⁴² When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, ⁴³ Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁴⁴ Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. ⁴⁵ When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. ⁴⁶ Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. ⁴⁷ Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where the body was laid.

When the Jewish Leaders shouted at Jesus and invited him to come down and save himself, Jesus' choice was stark: save himself or save humanity. They said that, if he did this, they would believe in him. Yet, it is precisely because he didn't come down that we, 2000 years later, can believe in him.

When faced with difficult things to do, rituals sometimes help and the Romans had ritualised the act of crucifixion and so they had no choices or decisions to make, they followed the ritual and that may have helped them to cope with the brutal extinction of a human life. The victim carried their cross set in the middle of a square of four soldiers, with a fifth walking in front with the charge of the board that would eventually be transferred to the cross. They took the longest route so that the largest number of people could see and take note: this was what happened to those who stood against Rome. At the place of execution the cross was laid on the ground and the victim laid on it and was nailed to the wood through the wrists. There was a ledge on the cross, the saddle and the victims' feet were loosely tied to the cross to allow them to take some weight to prevent their wrists tearing. The cross was then dropped onto its socket in the ground and the soldiers gambled for the perks of their job, the clothing of the victims. The natural anaesthetic was offered. Once that was done it was a waiting game and it could take up to a week to die.

Simon of Cyrene, distinctively African in Jerusalem, wasn't given the opportunity to save himself from being involved in carrying Jesus' cross. He would have had a tap on the shoulder with the broad side of a Roman spear and had no choice but to shoulder the weight of the cross. You may imagine how unwilling he would have been to change his plans for a Passover in Jerusalem, yet it seems that this encounter changed his life. He was clearly a leading member of the Church at Antioch that commissioned Saul and Barnabas [Acts 13¹] and Paul sends greeting to his family in Rome [Romans 16¹³]. The cross changes lives – it isn't possible to save yourself except through the cross of Jesus. As has been the case through all the history from that moment, those crucified with Jesus – the sinners amongst whom he had lived and taught -one accepted him and secured his hope and the other did not.

The cross has stood through the ages as the sign and symbol of the limitless love of God. Yet, the bleakness of Calvary is further accentuated as creation itself darkens at the sight of Jesus on the cross. That limitless

love of God is particularly clear in the two things Mark records Jesus as saying on the Cross.

The words of Psalm 22 are heart-wrenching: 'My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?' The only human reality that Jesus had not experienced was the consequences of sin, separation from God. In this moment, as Jesus became sin for us, he, for the first time in eternity, experienced that separation. The indivisible was divided and Jesus, the sacrificial victim, had to die alone trusting himself and all humanity into his Father's hands. As we are called to faith, so Jesus shows us what faith is like in his willingness to accept that unique and fearful separation from God.

The cry, 'It is Finished', is the cry of hope. In three hours, Jesus has fulfilled God's plan, has borne our sins and has died. He gave his life and so is the willing sacrifice. The women, including his mother, have watched from a distance, yet they are there – powerless but present. The curtain in the Temple is torn and shows us that in seeing Jesus we see God unveiled and have unrestricted access.

Two characters remain and teach us that this moment in time, this act of grace leaves us with a question that must be answered. Do we ever think that we can save ourselves? The Centurion, that hardened Regimental Sergeant Major, recognised the unique divinity in Jesus in his confession of Jesus as the Son of God. He knew that he could not save himself and that was only possible as he allowed himself to be embraced within the limitless love of God that he had witnessed at the cross. Then there was Joseph of Arimathea, who must have remained silent during Jesus' trial, but now comes forward and, once Pilate has the assurance that Jesus really is dead, is allowed to bury him in a stone tomb.

Jesus chose not to save himself. He chose to save you and me.

THE COLLECT

Almighty Father, look with mercy on this your family for which our Lord Jesus Christ was content to be betrayed and given up into the hands of sinners and to suffer death upon the cross; who is alive and glorified with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen**