

**Holy Week Reflections 2021**

**Monday 29<sup>th</sup> March – Matthew 26:1-16 ‘Extravagant love’**

It's a long time since we been able to use it properly, but we're blessed to be able to worship in a beautiful, inspiring building. Despite being made with wooden scaffolds, rudimentary tools and makeshift mortar, it has stood for hundreds of years, and is likely to for hundreds more. Most of us sucked in our breath and felt a sense of thrill when we first stepped inside it. Many of us do even now. Imagine what it must have been like for the mediaeval peasant folk who lived around it in timber dwellings? Imagine the awe, the sense of glory and mystery – all pointing to the great God in whose name it was built.

The church is really the people, of course it is – and we must beware idolatry of bricks and mortar. But all the same, a glorious building not only inspires worship, but represents an *act of worship in itself*. It's not often that we think of the cost of building it. How on earth does a poor agrarian subsistence economy finance such luxury? What did it cost each peasant family to pay their taxes over decades to see it built? Yes, it certainly provided much needed employment and a focus for the identity of the village – but I wonder how many times a family went hungry or made some other sacrifice to see it built? What poverty might have been alleviated if the money hadn't been spent on a building at least ten times larger than anything around it, whose sole purpose was for worship?

When we start to ask these questions, we get to the heart of today's famous but unsettling story. We love the image of the woman anointing Jesus' head with this very expensive perfume, but many of us no doubt share the disciples' sentiments. Jesus had just challenged the financial corruption of the temple officials, and yet here he was a few days later, apparently condoning an act of wasteful, reckless extravagance. Surely there are better ways to spend money wisely?

But Jesus is having none of it. Yes, we should always care for those who need it, as Jesus advises – but he also reminds us that *the first and primary object of our attention is Jesus himself*. Jesus' own love for us is extravagant, reckless even – the end of this week proves it, beyond a shadow of a doubt – and so, too, he commends extravagant love returned. This woman's costly worship, done for no other reason than to demonstrate her adoration of her Lord, is 'a beautiful thing'.

The woman could never have known that Jesus' prediction would come true: 'wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.' Just as the poor mediaeval families who made sacrifices for decades to pay for and build our church building could never have known that 700 or 800 years later, people would *still* be gasping as they enter, people would *still* be offering their worship to God with hearts and hands raised in adoration – that their offering of extravagant love would remain powerful, inspiring, enduring. It is a beautiful thing.

As Holy Week begins, take time to reflect on the reckless, extravagant love of God for you – yes, you! The love that led to extraordinary sacrifice. Let's acknowledge that too often we become people who know 'the price of everything and the value of nothing.' Let's recommit ourselves to extravagant worship, reflecting the wild, reckless love of our Creator. It is a beautiful thing.

*Loving Jesus, thank you for your extravagant love for me. My love for you so often has limits. Help me to love you as you love me. Open my eyes to see what the woman at Bethany saw. Thank you. Amen.*

**Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> March – Matthew 26:17-35 ‘All fall away’**

The journey of Jesus through Holy Week is, among many things, a journey from crowds to loneliness. The great throng of Palm Sunday becomes the large crowd in the temple; then the smaller gathering at Bethany, moving on to the Last Supper with his disciples; then just Peter, James and John in Gethsemane, until finally Jesus is arrested and is completely alone. Listeners left, followers gone, friends fled.

The narrative becomes more intense, claustrophobic. Today Jesus prepares to ‘celebrate’ the Passover (v18), then at the celebration itself talks of betrayal (v21) and his own shed blood (v28). He finishes the meal with an evening walk where he finally comes clean: ‘this very night you will all fall away on account of me.’ (v31)

It is a stark and sobering admission, and not surprisingly his friends, buoyed not just by wine and conversation, but an evening reflecting on God’s sovereign activity in history, don’t agree. A tight-knit huddle, they’ve weathered all storms – literal and spiritual – for three years. They’re just not the ‘falling away’ types – especially not gung-ho, have-a-go Peter. ‘Even if all fall away, I never will.’

We all know what happens next, and we’ll reflect some more on it over the coming days. But I’m always struck by the disconnect between words and deeds. Between brave declarations, and craven response. Between intention and action. ‘The Spirit is willing’ – it usually is – ‘but the flesh is weak.’

And as we gaze back at these iconic scenes with 2,000 years’ perspective – two millennia of knowledge and experience – it strikes me that the only honest response is simply this: *there but for the grace of God go I*. Go any of us. The disciples are just like us: true of heart and easily scattered. How many times has the rooster crowed for each of us?

And yet... and yet.... Jesus is still Jesus. Still full of compassion and mercy, still slow to anger and of great goodness. Still able to welcome us back with our blushing, tear-stained cheeks. And in this famous meal he gives us, this simple but glorious act of remembrance, we are able each time to acknowledge our weakness, and praise his strength; to lament our faithlessness and rejoice in his faithfulness; to receive mercy and forgiveness again. Every time we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the Lord’s saving death until he comes.

Even as they gather to celebrate the Passover, Jesus knows they will all desert him within hours – and yet he gives them this wonderful sign of his love anyway. That is grace – and it is grace we remember today. As the old hymn puts it so well: ‘When Satan tempts me to despair, and tells me of the guilt within: upwards I look and see him there, who made an end of all my sin.’ Amen, thank you Jesus.

*Loving Lord, there but for your grace I would have gone so many times. Thank you for your mercy and love. Make my weak knees strong, and stand by my side always. Amen.*

**Wednesday 31<sup>st</sup> March – Matthew 26:36-46 ‘Not as I will’**

The will – it’s a strange and slightly mysterious thing, isn’t it? We first start to see it when a child is just a few months old, newly weaned – turning their nose up at one mouthful of food only to embrace another.

Wills famously start to assert themselves strongly as toddlers. The battles all of us parents will remember! Usually over little things, but nonetheless important, as ultimately it’s about who’s in charge. And this sense of the will lives on in those who are described as ‘strong-willed’, which is often a euphemism for people who like to get their own way!

*The will is a statement not just of authority but of intent.* When couples get married they don’t say ‘I do’ (sorry to disappoint you), but ‘I will’. Even our last wishes are declared by – you guessed it – a will.

Wills matter. The great spiritual writer Watchman Nee defined the soul as the combination of the mind, the emotions and the will. It differs from the other two precisely because *it defines where (and to whom) our gaze is directed.* If the mind gives us the what and why, and the emotions the how, the will focuses us on the where and to whom. In matters of life and faith, whose will prevails?

All of which leads perfectly onto the heart of this passage today. Here we see two battles of the will, both within a person or people. For the disciples, the tussle is relatively straightforward: their spiritual desire to support their friend Jesus versus their physical desire to sleep on a warm, dark evening after a large meal.

For Jesus, the battle is much more intense, life (and death) defining even. Jesus’ destiny hangs in the balance: he knows what lies ahead, and he faces the ultimate test of the will: his own, human will to avoid it, clashing with what he knows his Father’s will to be.

The struggle is immense: he describes himself to his friends as ‘overwhelmed with sorrow’; in Luke’s account, his anguish is so intense it bursts blood vessels near the skin surface, so he literally sweats blood. Whose *will* will prevail?

As we observed earlier, it all comes down to authority and intent. Ultimately Jesus was completely obedient to one authority, and one alone – his Father’s. And this determined his intention. After hours of wrestling, he comes to the earth-shattering, earth-changing decision: ‘Yet not as I will, but as you will.’ Nine words which change the universe, the course of history, the future of humanity.

The contrast with the disciples is so stark, it’s almost tragically funny. Jesus wrestles for his life while they wrestle with their eyelids. How like us! How wonderful, then, to know that our future rests in Jesus’ perfect obedience rather than ours.

And may that hope of a secure future, thanks to Jesus’ costly obedience – also give us inspiration and courage to surrender to God’s will in the little – and not-so-little – callings of our lives.

*Courageous God, I am in awe of your obedience. Thank you, thank you that you said ‘Not as I will.’ Help me to will as you will, because I know that you are good. Amen.*

**Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> April – Matthew 26:47-56 ‘Twelve legions’**

‘I turned round to see the voice that was speaking to me.... The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.’

These words of St John in the Book of Revelation give us a wonderful insight into what the heavenly Jesus looks like. So often we like to imagine the human Jesus, just like us – and rightly so. God comes into the mess of our world, and how we needed him to! But it’s not the whole story. Jesus is fully human, but also fully God. The glorified Jesus is an altogether different proposition – so breathtakingly magnificent that even one of his best friends can do nothing but fall on his face in terrified awe.

This is who we’re *really* dealing with – the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, who reigns for ever and ever. And as we see in today’s passage, it’s also who the crowds that confronted Jesus at his arrest were *really* dealing with – if only they knew! And Jesus at one point sees fit to remind them of it. ‘Don’t think for a moment,’ Jesus says, ‘that you’re arresting me because you have all the power here.’

When Jesus goes with them, he’s not being pragmatic in the face of superior force. Far from it. If he wished to, he could call on ‘twelve legions of angels’ – or 72,000 heavenly beings. Just like that. With a click of his fingers every club could be snapped like a twig, every sword bent into a plough, every thug rounded up and dealt with. Just like that. You don’t mess with the Almighty Sovereign Ruler of the Universe, the Eternal Lord of all Creation....

...Unless this Lord wills it. (That word again.) And in this case, the Lord does. All that power, all that authority is hidden, locked up for a time, because a deeper work is at play. God’s word – delivered by numerous prophets – must be fulfilled.

And so Jesus goes with them – willingly. The hard work in Gethsemane has been completed: an even harder work lies ahead. But today we give thanks that what happens at Jesus’ arrest is not some accident, some failure of planning or momentary lapse of reason. The human authorities are not in charge here. They might *think* they are... but, in the end, ‘it must happen in this way.’

And we’ll praise God forever that it did.

*Faithful Lord, thank you that you gave up your freedom that we might be freed. You gave up your reputation that we might be restored. You gave up your power that we might be empowered. We can never thank you enough. May your peace-filled love overflow in our hearts today. Amen.*

**Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> April – Matthew 27:57-66 ‘Sitting there’**

I can't sit still for long. I'm better than I used to be, which isn't saying a lot – and probably as much to do with being older as any great advance in my capacity for stillness. I like being busy, doing lots of different things, cramming my days full. *Achieving*. Or so I think.

This is not just my nature – there's a lot of nurture too. My school culture rewarded competing, and I was only too happy to sign up to that. Then just as I started to ease up, parenthood kicks in and, as I used to joke, gives us all ADHD. When you've got young children you never get to focus on anything for very long – and after a while, you find you've lost the knack, if only to stop yourself falling asleep whenever you get a free moment.

I must admit (with some embarrassment) that, ironically, being a vicar doesn't help much with leading a more contemplative life. Long days, unexpected pastoral crises, paper-thin boundary between home and work, and the awkward fact that many other people's sabbath is the most intense part of my week. Plus the internal and external pressure of being seen to make the most of your calling: the old Protestants used to call it 'redeeming the time,' thereby even creating a theology out of what is basically workaholicism. I don't get paid to sit in a chair, do I? Or so the whisper in my ear goes...

So what struck me today as I reflected on our passage are not the much more obvious stories in the text: not Joseph giving up his tomb for the crucified convict. Nor the religious leaders desperately seeking to shore up their own lies with the threat of (what they presented as) an even bigger one. Nor even the comical image of Pilate setting up a security detail to thwart the purposes of the Lord Almighty – as if a few spears and a big stone was going to make a jot of difference!

It's the tiny detail I'd never noticed before – the women 'sitting there' (v61). Note that this is not Sunday morning, or indeed earlier on Friday when the crowds surrounded the cross. This is *Friday evening* – the crowds went hours ago, the disciples have long since fled, even Joseph (aided by Nicodemus, as John tells us) has finished his funereal duties and wandered off. And still they sit. Just being close to their departed friend. Watching, waiting, grieving, loving.

Why is the greatest event of all history, the resurrection of Jesus, revealed first to Mary and Mary? There are lots of answers to that, but the simplest one of all is this: *because they were there*. They were the last to leave and the first to come back. They spent time with their Lord even in death. And I find that both immensely inspiring and immensely challenging at the same.

On Holy Saturday it's hard to keep sitting. If we're lucky, we may have social events to enjoy. We'll certainly have plans to complete for Easter Sunday or Bank Holiday Monday, food to buy, eggs to hide, and so on, and so on. We've done the sitting on Friday, we'll do the singing on Sunday. But in between....

This is a thought more to myself than to anyone reading – but nonetheless a worthwhile one. Take a few moments if you can today to sit with Mary and Mary, to contemplate the tomb, to remember again what it cost Jesus before the joy of tomorrow. Tomorrow always comes – hallelujah! – but there's gold in the waiting, too.

*Lord Jesus, help me to sit today, even for a few moments. To watch and wait with your friends, that I, with them, might experience tomorrow with fresh eyes. Amen.*