

SERMONS AND REFLECTIONS FOR HOLY WEEK AND EASTER 2010

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The Anglican Parish of Sorrento and Rye

Victoria

*“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart
be always acceptable to you,
O God my strength and my redeemer.”*

A MAUNDY THURSDAY SERMON 2010

St John's Sorrento

As a young man, I used to experience Maundy Thursday as a religious event so sweet and rich as to be almost overpowering. It could never come soon enough and it was over far too soon, and suddenly we were in the gloom, hardness and acidity of Good Friday. Maundy Thursday was sheer pleasure. Good Friday was pain. Yet, as I matured in the faith and in the spiritual life, I came to know that the Rites of Maundy Thursday are a unique combination of high joy and deep sorrow, and to experience the one and not the other is dangerous to say the least.

On this day we rejoice in our Lord's institution of the Lord's Supper, the Holy Communion, the Eucharist. Here, under the forms of bread and wine, the people of faith receive the Body and Blood of Christ to their immediate and eternal good. We receive Christ again into our lives, even as we receive the mysteries of consecrated bread and wine in our mouth. As he humbled himself to be conceived in a human womb, to be born as a human child in a stable, and, at his birth, to be laid in a manger where cattle fed, so he deigns to come to us, hidden beneath the outward forms of bread and wine. So the Lord of heaven and earth humbles himself to be ingested by sinful human beings, in order that they might receive him, and the benefits of his sacrifice, into their very souls.

At the same time, this great sacrament that we revere is that one in which we, as Paul says, "proclaim his death until he comes". It is in this rite that we rehearse what our Lord himself did on that night in the Upper Room of John Mark's house in Jerusalem, on the night he would be betrayed and the night before he died. And at the supper he took bread and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, broken for you". And at the end of the meal, he took up a cup of wine and gave it to them saying, "This is my blood, shed for you and for many." So he was offering them his broken, bleeding and crucified body, hung upon a cross for their sins and the sins of all the world and inviting them to eat and drink this, his sacrifice, his suffering and death, in order that sin might be forgiven and death defeated.

We also celebrate in this sacrament God's great loving kindness to us, his desire to feed us in body and soul, in mind and in spirit, in conscience and in the deep heart's core. And yet we also know that those who eat and drink this heavenly food unworthily, who fail, as Paul says, to discern the body - his body and blood under the forms of bread and wine, yes, but also the Body of Christ, Christ present in every baptised and believing member of the Church – that those who fail to discern the body and eat and drink unworthily, eat and drink to themselves, not salvation,

but damnation. “This is why,” says Paul to those who do so, “many of you are sick and some of you have died”.

Is it any wonder then, knowing how in-woven into our natures is sin - knowing sin, and unknowing, intentional sin and accidental, occasional and persistent - that we approach this great sacrament saying, “Lord I am not worthy”? For if we judge ourselves and repent, we are forgiven, and are welcome at the feast. If we make sure we come, not wearing our own righteousness (faded and full of holes) but having put on the righteousness of Christ, and if we are wearing his purity and goodness as a wedding garment, we will not be cast out by the angels but gathered in.

How exquisite, then, on this night and in this rite is the interweaving of joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, welcomes and warnings, glories and agonies. And when Jesus lays aside his robe and, like a common household slave of the lowest order, washes the feet of the guests at the dinner, is there not the same mixture of darkness and light? “Lord,” said Peter, recoiling, “*you will never wash my feet!*” That is, “I will never let you wash my feet!” Peter, the sinful man, once again shrinks back, his heart testifying against him – “Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man,” his words imply. Jesus did not calm his fears or defuse his sense of unworthiness. On the contrary, Jesus said to Peter, “If I do not wash you, you have no part in me.”

Let that sink in for a moment. These are words for each and every one of us. “If I do not wash you, you have no part in me.” Is there not incredible joy hidden in this, to think that we *can* be made part of Christ, a member of his body, he, dwelling in us and we, in him? And yet, and yet! “If I do not wash you . . .”

Are we washed, are we sanctified? Do we have clean hands and pure hearts? Does our sin not cling to us even when we try our hardest to be holy? Does sin not crouch at the door, and is not its desire to claim us as its own. “Oh,” says sin, “you can be as religious as you like. You can dress up holy and float around like an angel of God for an hour or two. You can make yourself to be better than others. But I know what goes on in your life! I know your heart and mind! So just remember, you are mine and I will have you.”

Do you think then that this washing of feet is *only* about serving one another in love and caring for one another? Did you not hear those words, “If I do not wash you, you have no part in me?” And if you hear them now, will you come to the water and be washed by Jesus, inside and out, not just your feet but every part of you? Peter said, “If that is the case, Lord, then wash my head and my hands!” He was asking to be baptised! He wanted to be clean through and through, washed by Jesus. Do you sense the fear, the panic in him as well as the hope and longing?

But then Jesus said, “It is enough for me to wash your feet and then you are clean, through and through”. Why? Because the dirt on Peter’s feet symbolises the dirt of the world that we bring with us into the Holy of Holies, into the most sacred place of the Bridal Feast. In other words, Jesus says he will wash the dirt of the world off us, that we may enter clean into the House of God and the company of the angels and the saints in light.

So are you clean? Or are you keeping a bit of worldly dirt on you, just in case you need it? Or have you left it at the door, intending to collect it on the way out?

What agony and ecstasy, then, is this rite. High joy and deep sorrow – joy to be loved so greatly, sorrow over the persistent reality of sin. Here, the ministry of love, so moving and so reassuring, this humbling of ourselves to serve one another. “As I have washed your feet,” he said, “so you must wash one another’s feet”. Yet here, too, is the severe ministry of the washing or scouring away of sin, the ministry of baptism that removes the taint and stain of the world, and breaks the power of sin and death over us. Here, as well, the confronting of sin in our midst and not turning a blind eye and pretending you didn’t see what you saw, or a deaf ear and pretending you didn’t hear what you heard. And if it was I who did or said, how easy it is to pretend I never said it, I never did it. Or if I did, it was an accident, or not really bad, or justified.

High joy and deep sorrow. Brothers and sisters in Christ, there is indeed, no other rite in the Christian year that is such a fine interweaving of pleasures and pains, of sweet and bitter, of bread and ashes, of roses and thorns. And if there are those who only attend to the sweet, eat the bread and smell the roses, we understand – we often do no less -- but we fear for them, that they will never survive the world, master the flesh or defeat the devil.

“You seek me,” said Jesus to a crowd following him, “not because you saw the signs, but because you ate your fill of the bread.” In other words, you were shown a miracle, and all you got out of it was a full stomach, which will be empty again tomorrow if it is not already so. I ask you, then, as I ask myself, “John, are you here only for the bread? Or do you have the grace and courage to face the pain. see the *signs* and get the *message* in what we do this night?”

“This is my body, broken for you.”

“This is my blood, shed for you.”

“If I do not wash you, you have no part in me.”#

A GOOD FRIDAY REFLECTION 2010
The Veneration of the Cross
St John's Sorrento and St Andrew's Rye

Few people can know what Jesus suffered as a human being on this day: the betrayal, the rigged trial, the false accusations, the condemnation, the abandonment to his enemies, the abuse, the rejection, the beatings, the mental and emotional as well as physical cruelty, the torture, the degradation of public execution, the mockery, the extreme of pain, and the agonizingly slow death.

As for what he suffered as God the Son, no-one, not one of us, no matter what he or she has suffered, can even begin to imagine.

Yet we can, if we try, enter some way into the experience of his mother, his family, his friends and disciples on that day, and through the long, dark day which followed as he lay in the tomb, buried dead with all their shattered hopes and dreams. So how might we enter into this experience? Let me suggest one way.

In 1910, a poem was published by the famous American sportswriter Grantland Rice. It was a description of the close of a baseball game, although it could equally apply to any sport or to any fierce contention conducted according to set of rules and a set of values. In this poem, the expression "Game called" is the equivalent of "Game over" or "Full time". The last verse of the poem reads:

Game Called. Upon the field of life
the darkness gathers far and wide,
the dream is done, the score is spun
that stands forever in the guide.
Nor victory, nor yet defeat
is chalked against the players name.
But down the roll, the final scroll,
shows **only how he played the game.**

In 1927, Rice also wrote another piece, entitled "Alumnus Football," in which he expanded the reference to "playing the game". This poem tells the story of a battering ram of a player called William, who, when his college course finished, continued to play the game as a graduate student. It is a poem about fierce courage and refusal to quit. William, the ageing player, starts to find his best efforts frustrated by the opposition and to doubt his ability to beat them. Then the coach takes him aside and gives him advice about his play.

Of course, as an account of the nature and meaning of the death of Jesus Christ, Rice's poem is a long way from being good Christian teaching and is indeed theologically well off the mark. However, as a way of grasping something of how Jesus' *followers* felt on the day Jesus died, I think it has a great deal to offer. So let me, on this Good Friday, offer you the whole poem, as a way of connecting with their feelings and with your own, as we take Christ down from the cross and lay his broken body dead within the tomb:

**Game Called by darkness — let the curtain fall.
No more remembered thunder sweeps the field.
No more the ancient echoes hear the call
To one who wore so well both sword and shield:
The Big Guy's left us with the night to face
And there is no one who can take his place.**

**Game Called — and silence settles on the plain.
Where is the crash of ash against the sphere?
Where is the mighty music, the refrain
That once brought joy to every waiting ear?
The Big Guy's left us lonely in the dark
Forever waiting for the flaming spark.**

**Game Called — what more is there for us to say?
How dull and drab the field looks to the eye,
For one who ruled it in a golden day
Has waved his cap to bid us all good-bye.
The Big Guy's gone — by land or sea or foam
May the Great Umpire call him "safe at home."**

*Note: It is said Rice's motto derives from a story told by the 5th Century Greek historian, Herodotus. In the story, it is said of the Greek Olympic athletes that "Tis not for money they contend, but for glory". However, I see no convincing connection between that observation about pagan athletes competing not for gain but glory, and Rice's poems which are profoundly Christian and reflect a very different tradition altogether. That is, as reflections upon the death of Jesus, Rice's poems do not say that Jesus died, like an Olympic athlete, in a struggle to the death with the forces of evil ranged against him, and that he did so solely in a bid – a failed bid as it turned out - for the glory of winning.

GOOD FRIDAY:

REFLECTIONS UPON THE SEVEN WORDS FROM THE CROSS

St Andrew's Rye 2010

THE FIRST WORD:

Jesus said, "Father forgive them"

Human beings who have been injured and aggrieved often experience forgiveness as a weakness. To forgive someone who has injured you seems to add to your injury, and forgiving looks like a very poor substitute for taking revenge and seeing justice done.

What we learn from the cross, and from Jesus words "Father, forgive them", is that forgiveness is in fact power. It is the power of God who forgives sin to give sinners a second chance and a chance to change. It is power to release the offender from the prison of your anger to become a better person. They may never do so but, as far as it lies within your power to help or hinder that change, if you turn the key, release them and give them liberty to change, perhaps they will.

Forgiveness is also power to do yourself great good. It is power to release yourself from the tyranny of your own injured feelings and your outraged sense of fairness and justice, which tear at you inside. A nurtured sense of injustice and imagining somehow, by refusing forgiveness, you are hurting the other who has offended you, plants what the bible calls "a root of bitterness". It generates poison in your body, mind and spirit, and it can be just as harmful as any injury someone else might do you. Forgiveness then is also the power to stop hurting yourself.

THE SECOND WORD:

Jesus said, "Today you will be with me in paradise"

Jesus' assured the criminal who was crucified along with him that he would be with him in paradise. This brief exchange is perhaps the very best demonstration of justification by faith that is to be found in the whole of the New Testament. The man acknowledges his fault, and Jesus' innocence, and asks only that Jesus remember him when he returned as king. Somehow, within a few minutes or perhaps hours at most, this man realised what many would struggle for years to grasp:

that the man dying beside him was the Messiah, and that his death was not defeat but the means by which Jesus was to ascend the throne as King of the Jews and Lord of all humankind. All the penitent criminal asked was that, when Jesus returned as king, he would not forget him.

The Christian religion is not a simple matter, but, at its heart, salvation in Christ is extraordinarily simple. It requires only a sincere and authentic turning away from sin, a turning to Jesus as Lord and Saviour, obedience of his commands and a rebirth in the Holy Spirit. On the cross that day, the penitent criminal turned from sin and turned to Jesus. He placed his faith in him and, in the few hours he had left, lived a new life, a life lived in expectation of the coming of the Kingdom of God. We may understand that he did all this, not by his own power, but by the power of the Holy Spirit in whom he was, in effect, reborn.

As we stand below the cross, we too have the opportunity to get back to the basics of our faith and to say, “Lord, remember me when you come in your kingly glory!”

THE THIRD WORD:

Jesus said, “Woman behold your son; son, behold your mother.”

Why, do you think, John recorded for us this very intimate exchange between Jesus, Mary and himself? Was it to cement his own position among the Apostles as the guardian of Mary and the Church’s royal family? Was it to show that Jesus placed his church, represented by Mary, in John’s care, no less than Peter’s? Or is the story told because it illustrates something essential about the character of Jesus? The possibilities are endless.

Whatever else it shows, it reveals how, in the extreme of his own agony and dying, Jesus could look with concern upon his mother and his friend and give them into each other’s care. From this, we too may know that, from his cross, Jesus also looks upon us, and commits us into each other’s care as members of his family. On this day, the Church prays that prayer which says, “Almighty God, look with mercy upon this your family for whom our Lord, Jesus Christ, was willing to be betrayed, given into the hands of sinners and suffer death upon the cross.” Good Friday, then, is very much the day when Christians are reassured of their membership of a heavenly family and, at the same time, called upon to think seriously about what their being family should mean.

The word family is often thrown around all too casually and people can be misled by it, taking it to mean things about what they may expect from other Christians and members of churches. It can also be used as a form of emotional blackmail and manipulation. So what is the right meaning, the healthy meaning, of this word “family”? In what sense are we Christians our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers?

THE FOURTH WORD

Jesus said, “My God my God, why have you forsaken me?”

The worst possible experience for human beings is to be “without God in the world”, to feel utterly cut off from the source of all goodness. In the spiritual life, this is called The Dark Night of the Soul. However, with the words of Psalm 22, Jesus the man voiced the pain of feeling that the God who had sustained him every moment of every day of his life had left him and was, to him, as if he did not exist. As for Jesus the God, we can hardly begin even to speculate what this might mean. Yet the fact remains that Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, surrendered himself to, as Paul says, “becoming sin who knew no sin”. He had emptied himself of his glory in coming into the world but it was not until he was hanging upon the cross that he experienced total dereliction. Jesus was willing to endure the worst that hell can inflict out of obedience to his Father – yet now, his Father had turned his back on him. It will only be if we ourselves enter hell that we will ever experience this horror unabated.

Of course Jesus obeyed his Father to this extent and went into the grave to save us, to endure what would be our lot if he did not take our sufferings upon himself. This must surely make us wonder how we could deserve such a saviour. The answer is “We cannot”. It is not our deserving but his love, and God’s determination to defeat sin and death and deliver us safely into eternal life.

THE FIFTH WORD

Jesus said, “I am thirsty.”

After breathing, drinking water is the most irresistible demand of our physical bodies. You cannot stop breathing for long before your body forces you to breathe. Similarly, you cannot go without water for long before your entire consciousness is absorbed by your thirst and your need to find drink. When the body begins to die for want of water, you will do anything, drink anything, in the hope of quenching your thirst and restoring your bodily and mental functions.

Jesus' thirst is a natural thing. In the days of health and strength he thirsted, and he even asked a Samaritan woman for a drink of water. On this day, however, he had been subjected to beatings and torture, been flogged, crowned with thorns and forced to carry his crossbeam to the place of execution. He had suffered a great loss of blood. Yet not even such a thirst as he was experiencing was sufficient to overcome his resolution and his submission to the will of God. He did not call on God to send his angels to deliver him. He did not begin to beg for mercy or renounce his cause. Instead he sought means to hold fast and said, "I thirst". A drink of water would keep him going.

How easy, then, by comparison, do we lose focus, lose heart, lose resolve and wander from the course to which we committed ourselves. The Letter to the Hebrews says "You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood". He could have said more, namely, that we have not resisted even to the point of working up a serious thirst.

Lord Jesus, look upon us who have promised to follow you, to take up our crosses and to die for you. Grant us to drink from the cup of grace from which you drank, and inspire in us the determination to see our calling through to the end and not, for any fear of death, fall away from following you.

THE SIXTH WORD

Jesus said, "It is finished."

"Finish the race," we say in Holy Baptism. "Finish the race, keep the faith". St Paul urges us to run so that we may finish the race and receive the prize of the heavenward call of Jesus Christ. With these words, "It is finished", Jesus finished his race in triumph. He ran it to the end. Although in natural terms his body did expire, breathing out its last breath, we know that Jesus died having achieved his goal. He was obedient to the very end and he came home with the prize.

Of course the prize was really for us. It is our salvation. Sometimes there are programs on television where celebrities compete in some kind of contest representing a charity. The celebrity, who wins, wins not for him or herself but for the people the charity assists. So too Jesus, the Son of man, undergoes the experience of earthly life and hardship, aspiration and struggle, and endures hatred, adversity, frustration, betrayal and a violent and brutal death for the sake of others.

On the other hand, however, it is the nature of God to glory. God acts for his own name's sake and for the sake of his glory. Being God, Jesus also acts for his name's sake and, when he finishes, his "It is finished!" is another outburst of the glory of God. Did anyone see it? Well, one soldier did see something of it, but whether anyone else did, we do not know. The question for us, however, is whether we do. In those words, "It is finished", can we see, not only the Son of man saying, "I have done it!", but God himself thundering from the clouds in the darkening sky, "I have been glorified, and I will be glorified again!" If so, it is for us to say, "Father, glorify your name!"

THE SEVENTH WORD

Jesus said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

In this word, I hear a childhood prayer that Mary probably taught Jesus to pray. I am reminded of the prayer that begins, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray thee Lord my soul to keep". Of course "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" is a quotation from Scripture, but, said as a prayer by a dying man, it does remind me of a child praying at bedtime. It speaks of peace and of relief and of happy release.

However, this word is also a statement of Jesus' faith that he could undergo death but his Father would raise him up. As Son of man, Jesus lives and dies by faith alone. He does not know all his Father knows. He does not know who will sit beside him on the throne of his kingdom, and he does not know when the end of the world will come. So in going to his death, he was believing, and trusting his Father to look after him. Jesus commits his spirit, his life, into his Father's hands, to do with as he will, because he has absolute faith that his Father's will for him will be, as the bible says, "good, perfect and pleasing". I am reminded of Jesus saying, "If you, who are sinners, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?" Let us commit our spirits to God, not only in taking our rest and release and finding relief, but also in demonstrating our sure faith that, on the other side of the sleep of death, God our Father will raise us up to a new dawn and a whole new life.#

THE EASTER SERMON 2010

St John's, Sorrento 8.30AM and 10.30am

Today, the worldwide Christian Church, in all its diversity, and despite of its divisions, is united in the celebration of the event in history out of which it first arose. It is also the event to which the Church continually returns to be renewed in its reason for being for Christians are, in essence, those who, by gift of faith and in the power of the Holy Spirit, witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. So we who are gathered here are but a tiny handful of the millions who keep this feast.

Amongst us, we too are diverse, though I hope not divided. For example, some of us are members of the local congregation and are here, Sunday by Sunday. Some of us have returned here today from elsewhere to renew an established personal or family connection. Some of us have come for the very first time. Some are locals, some are occasional visitors and some are welcome strangers.

Whichever of these you are, you have made a journey today to this place of Christian worship and fellowship, not just to “do the right thing”, but to make a pilgrimage of body, mind and spirit. You come, like the first disciples, to an empty tomb, and to hear and believe again the angelic message, “He is not here. He is risen!” You come also to a church filled with believers, and do so to affirm what it is *you* believe, and what are the *faith foundations* of your ideals, hopes and values.

However this is not the end of the journey. Our journey continues on, and so, in many ways, you are here to find out, not only whence you have come, but where you are going.

On the road to Emmaus, the Risen Jesus met two disciples and walked with them until they came to the house where they were to stay. Night was falling and he made as if to go on. That story is a parable of our lives. We, like Jesus, are always moving on. On that occasion, Jesus knew where he was going. The men pressed him to stay and to eat and rest with them. He did stay but, upon breaking the bread at the table, he vanished, disappeared from the house and went on his way.

So Jesus knew where he was going, but do we?

In two of the resurrection accounts, the disciples are told that Jesus was leaving Jerusalem and going to Galilee. In Mark 16.7, the angel at the tomb says to the three women, “But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is **going ahead of you to Galilee**; there you will see him, just as he told you”. Likewise, in Matthew 28.7, the angel tells the women, “Go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is **going ahead of you to Galilee**; there you will see him’”. Immediately after, in 28.10, the Risen Jesus himself meets these women on the road and says, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to **go to Galilee**; there they will see me”.

You will notice that our paschal candle has been painted according to our Easter theme this year, which is “He is going ahead of you into Galilee; you will see him there”. The purpose of this theme is to prompt each of us to ask, “Where are we going?” Of course, chances are, we are nearly all Australians and so we could be asking “Where is Australia going?” We are certainly all human beings, so we could also be asking “Where is the human race heading?” For you it may be a question even closer to home, to do with your family, or your circle of friends. Or it may be you want to ask this question about your company, your profession, your business and the people you work with. It could even be your social club, your surf club, your sailing club or football club! For many of us who are Anglicans, the question will also be “Where is the Anglican Church going?” There is certainly a lot going on in the Anglican world, but the question is where are we going?

For the people who have a living connection with this parish, the question is more even focused in the immediate present. We have in the last few months said farewell to our Assistant Curate of four years, Fr Hans, and our Vicar of ten years, the Reverend Catherine Eaton, and we have seen our Stipendiary Lay Minister, Kirsteen, step down from that role. As a result of Catherine’s departure, we are now embarked upon a search for a new vicar, and for a priest with the abilities, gifts and resources to lead this parish forward in a new phase of development and in the right direction. We the locals hardly need much prompting to be thinking and praying about these matters but,

if you are someone who values the opportunity to worship with us or call upon our ministry from time to time, I hope you will support us with your prayers.

Now the question “Where are *we* going?” always implies the question, “Where am *I* going?” and part of the answer will be to discover what things in your life are stopping from getting to where you should be.

There was a rich young man who came to Jesus and sought his approval. He wanted to be sure he would get into heaven and so he explained to Jesus that he had kept all the commandments from his childhood. However Jesus then said, “There is one commandment you have not kept.” The young man was startled, indeed shocked. How could he have missed one? Then Jesus gave him the lost commandment. He said, “Go, sell all you have, give it to the poor and come, be my disciple.” That young man, we are told, went away sorrowing, because he was very wealthy.

Now that young man’s biggest problems were his love of his money and all that went with it (importance, influence, power) and his love of his own goodness and the praise others heaped on him for it. In each of us there is at least one thing and probably several which stand between us and what we Christians call “eternal life”, that is, a way of living that arises here, endures through life, survives death and lasts forever.

Take time, then, this Easter season, to ask yourself what it is that stands between you and where you know in your heart you need to be. We here in the parish have to do this as a group – “What stands between us and being the church God wants us to be?” We also have to ask it of ourselves as individuals – “What is getting in the way of me being the Christian God calls me to be?” But these are questions for any Christian, because the Christian life is a pilgrimage, a journey, and it is as important to know what I preventing you from reaching God’s goals for you as it is to know what those goals are.

God’s blessing and guidance upon you, then, as you make your journey, either with us here, or wherever you hang your hat and call home. Jesus said, “Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; they will see me there.”#