

Maundy Thursday

with Canon Angela Tilby

Thursday 28 March | The Liturgy of Maundy Thursday at Exeter Cathedral

Psalm 116: 1, 10-16

I am well pleased: that the Lord hath heard the voice of my prayer;

I believed, and therefore will I speak; but I was sore troubled: I said in my haste, All men are liars.

What reward shall I give unto the Lord: for all the benefits that he hath done unto me?

I will receive the cup of salvation: and call upon the name of the Lord.

I will pay my vows now in the presence of all his people: right dear in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.

Behold, O Lord, how that I am thy servant: I am thy servant and the son of thine handmaid; thou hast broken my bonds in sunder.

I will offer to thee a sacrifice of thanksgiving: and will call upon the name of the Lord.

I will pay my vows unto the Lord, in the sight of all his people: in the courts of the Lord's house, even in the midst of thee, O Jerusalem. Praise the Lord.

'I am well pleased that the Lord hath heard the voice of my my prayer... I will receive the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord... I will offer to thee a sacrifice of thanksgiving and call upon the name of the Lord.'

Tonight we begin the three greatest days of the Christian year: the days of the Passion and Resurrection of Christ. The colour is white, we sing the Gloria in Excelsis, we commemorate the Lord's humility in washing the disciples' feet, we celebrate the Last Supper. And our psalm this evening begins with the voice of thanksgiving:

'I am well pleased that the Lord hath heard the voice of my prayer'. The washing of the disciples feet is, of course, an example of service, of how the disciples are to serve one another. But, I wonder if it is also a way in which Jesus expresses his thanks to the disciples, a recognition of those who, in spite of the betrayals to come, will ultimately stand with him in and through and beyond his trials. And I wonder whether part of what Christ intended was to inspire in his followers a habit of thankfulness, of gratitude. Perhaps the Christian Church would be a warmer and more attractive place if we remembered more often to be grateful to one another, to express our thanks and not just our criticisms and blame.

Thankfulness is, after all, a very distinctive human experience. I am not sure that other creatures share it, at least I don't think our domestic cat at home does, as he simply expects his human staff to produce fishy and meaty delights several times a day, and, while he wolfs them down and sometimes rewards us with a playful paw or a head butt, he doesn't exactly say grace.

Humans can both bless and complain. There is always plenty of cause for complaint of course, plenty of reasons in every life to feel anxious or fearful or critical or suspicious. The Psalmist does not forget that only a little while before he was 'sore troubled' or that he believed that all men were liars. We are often sore troubled, and yes, we do lie, and others lie to us, out of fear or guilt or ambition, sometimes even out of kindness.

But, as the mental health professionals are constantly reminding us, when anxieties and hatreds dominate our lives they are likely to make us ill. So, the often repeated advice is to keep a gratitude diary, to be thankful at least once a day or, to use the phrase, of the old hymn, to 'Count your blessings, name them one by one', however small they may seem. Little daily blessings are signs of the fullness of creation and so of God's provision, of God's love, of God's reaching out to us in welcome.

Richard Hooker, whose statue is on the Cathedral Green, wrote of the 'beautiful variety of things' which God produces in his abundance. Hooker suggests that there is a marvellous continuity of grace. We could put it like this, that the small joy of a coffee or a drink with a friend is a link on a chain of grace which leads to the Eucharist where we feed on Christ himself and become part of his Body. All is gift, all is grace. Small acts of love, service and courtesy have the potential to enrich the world and change it for the better.

Here, in the Eucharist, we are free to eat and drink as Christ's friends, we are here by his invitation, to become, as the Prayer Book puts it, 'very members incorporate in the mystical Body of his (God's) Son'. This means that we are never to be ultimately abandoned, never to be ultimately alone or crushed out of existence. The Eucharist simply IS the Gospel proclaimed, enacted, received. Richard Hooker insists that the sacrament of Holy Communion demonstrates for us 'how God is in Christ, and how Christ is in us, and how the sacraments do serve to make as participants in Christ'.

The next time we celebrate together in white and with the sounds of glory around us, it will be Easter. We would like of course to skip from now to Easter without having to go through tonight and tomorrow; just as we would prefer not to experience so many things, unfairness, worry, bereavement, sickness, loss of work, loss of worth, loss of faith. But the Eucharist invites us to come forward in spite of our fears and griefs because here is medicine for our souls, and defence when we confront temptation and struggle. Eating and drinking together with Christ challenges our isolation, repairs our selfishness, and restores us to God and to one another. For the Lord present here never betrays us, never lets us down, never returns evil for evil in spite of what we do to one another and to ourselves. The gift we receive in this Eucharist does not depend on our faith, or our feelings, or our correct views, or our sincerity. It depends wholly on God.

Yet a little phrase which crops up in the Eucharistic Prayer reminds us that though grace is free it is not without cost. It is on the night in which he was betrayed that Jesus takes bread, and that bread before it is given into our hands, is broken.

We come as we are, and bring with us to the Lord's table our particular memories and hopes. We bring our own loved ones, and especially those who are sick or depressed, scared or in trouble or dying, those who have died, and our grief for them. And also of course those from whom we are estranged, and even those we simply can't bear. Through these next three days they are with us. They are part of our prayer, part of our sorrow, part of our helplessness, part of our hope of redemption. We bring them to this table and they come with us to Gethsemane and to the Cross. The Psalmist has not forgotten his persecutors even as he raises the cup of salvation. And nor do we forget the world beyond ourselves. We do not forget the atrocities in Israel of October 7th, or the ruthless bombing, death, injury and starvation in Gaza, the crushing of dissent in Russia and China and Iran, the war in Ukraine, and the other often forgotten wars which scar humanity.

After this Eucharist the world will still be there, its conflicts not yet healed, its questions not yet answered. Only on Holy Saturday do we receive the beginning of answer to tonight's prayer; the glimmering dawn of Christ's new day and the image of the lost being drawn out of hell into the life of God's kingdom. But for now, we lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord. We trust the grace of salvation, we

sing, we share, we go forward. And all the time the betrayer is at hand.

Prayer:

God our Father

your Son Jesus Christ was obedient to the end,

and drank the cup prepared for him:

may we who share his table

watch with him through the night of suffering,

and be faithful.

