

Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 20th April 2025, Easter Day

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

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

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

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

The foot-washing on Thursday's service is always moving because it entails the vulnerability of giving one's feet into another's hands, and the humility of washing someone else's feet. Of course, this practice was part of everyday life at the time of Jesus usually done by the least important slave in the house, but it feels strange and exotic in a world that has surfaced roads, and shoes to protect our feet. What would be a familiar activity in our time that could speak more readily?

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

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

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

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

However, the night vigil primes people for the grim liturgical marathon of Good Friday. A marathon in which there are long readings about false accusation, mob fury, unjust trial, torture, and painful death. Some parishes put a large cross in the front of the church, have nails and hammers, and a crown of thorns... and sometimes that crown is made from barbed wire. On Good Friday we have an opportunity to think about the things we've done, or have not done, and the things that have diminished life for others. If we are open to it, we may recognise that most of us are culpable for something in a world that knows much brokenness.

Back in the day, public flogging and crucifixion was regularly used by the Roman Empire to keep law and order through fear but, surely, we now live in a more civilised era? We have international agreements about human rights, torture, and refugees. Yet the ongoing war in Ukraine would suggest otherwise. The ongoing, indiscriminate bombing of Gaza would suggest otherwise. The ongoing civil war massacres in Sudan would suggest otherwise.

Although the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza are often in the news cycle, there has been bloody conflict going on in many places for years. So, we can pray this weekend for the blessing of peace in Ukraine and Russia, Gaza and Israel... but also pray for peace in South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Somalia, and Afghanistan...

Maybe our time, and our society, is not as 'civilised' as we like to think? And, maybe justice and flourishing can only be for some people in the world, but not for all?

That thought and questioning makes me profoundly uncomfortable! However, I think *uncomfortable; angry; grieving; despairing; and, impotent...* are Good Friday feelings because it would have seemed that on that day injustice and self-interest had prevailed. Put more directly, on Good Friday it seemed that 'the bad guys' had won!

There are, however, at least two things that can cause us to be thankful on Good Friday. The first is that God shared our humanity so completely in Jesus – that he didn't run away from the awful stuff. He was steadfast, he suffered, and he died. In this I am reminded of the last words of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel in which he said, 'Remember, I am with you always, until the end of the age.' With us then, and with us now – in good times and bad.

The second thing is that – recognising we're all works in progress - there is opportunity for us to give our brokenness, selfishness, unkindness, indifference etc. to God, and from this find opportunity for transformation and new beginning.

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

John's Gospel on Easter Day tells us that Mary didn't recognise the resurrected Jesus until he called her by name... and there is such a gift for us in this. For God will and does bring new life to us, to our society, and to the world... but, we often fail to recognise it. To be fair it normally takes longer than three days to become clear... and sometimes we may not live long enough to see it!

'Though there are always signs of hope I think it will take generations for resurrection new life to become clear for the peoples of Ukraine, Gaza, and Sudan because so much has been destroyed, and so many lives have been lost.

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

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

In God's grace may HEAR Good News; SHARE Good News; and BE Good News!

Friends - the Lord is risen! Alleluia!

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Let's pray:

Holy God, we give thanks for the mystery of resurrection and the hope and transformation we find in you. In the midst of our joy, we ask you to sustain the peoples of Gaza, Ukraine, and Sudan and bless them with a just and sustainable peace. We ask in the name of Jesus, who overcame death. Amen.