

## Triduum 2025, St Thomas Exeter

I want to take the opportunity over these three very important days to suggest briefly how our liturgies – our prayers, our words, our music, and our actions – can help us to live better in a contemporary world of uncertainty, anxiety and even of fear.

You can hardly have missed the events coming out of the US in the last few weeks – what seems like abandonment of Ukraine, unqualified support for the Israeli government, and an upending of the type of world economy we have had for the last fifty years or so, on which America has grown very rich, or at least some Americans. But many there are now fearful, especially elderly poorer people.

If you have been mercifully unaware of this, and woken like Sleeping Beauty, you may still know that here prices continue to rise – energy, water, council tax. There are a lot of folk ‘living on the edge’, where a car breaking down for example can mean the inability to get to a second or a third job and so the loss of income. Families can easily tip over the edge.

And everybody is affected to a greater or lesser extent by personal or family issues: physical and mental ill-health, bereavement, injury.

There is a compounding here, a concentration of bad news, which sometimes despite the beauties of Spring, make life a trudge, and empty it of joy.

So **Maundy Thursday** helps us witness an act of great betrayal, as Judas helps Jesus’ opponents to capture him in return for 30 miserable pieces of silver. We never quite know his motivations – greed, dishonesty, Jesus’ failure to be the sort of Messiah Judas wanted and expected – but that’s often the way of human betrayal, as many of us will have experienced.

But Maundy Thursday is about much more, and it’s that ‘more’ which can help us now, perhaps provide a small antidote to the poison which threatens to infect us. Two further images: that of a shared meal, what we call the Last Supper during which bread is broken and wine poured out, and both are shared; and in John’s Gospel the image of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet.

Here we have community and service as an answer to anxiety and uncertainty. I am not claiming that this is very original, or that it is an entire answer, but that it can help remind us of our real priorities and our proper perspective.

I know the word can be over-used, but the disciples are to some extent a community already, having spent time with Jesus in prayer, in teachings and healings. But in using the setting of the Passover feast, the recall of the exodus from slavery to the Promised Land, and looking forward to his own death, Jesus is giving to the community of the disciples a powerful symbol, using the stuff of the earth: “Do this in remembrance of me”. As we share the Body of Christ, so we become the Body of Christ, not atomised individuals, but the beginnings of a community, of different people with shared values. We look beyond individual limitations to communal capability: what *I* may not be able to do on my own, *we* may be able to do together.

The washing of the disciples' feet is an extension of this, because Jesus again provides a model of our relations with other people – not of power, dominance, mastery, but that of service; not of 'might is right', of bluster and bullying, but of kindness and compassion. Peter resists here being served, and Jesus takes him to task – in our good communities, we learn to give and receive. We learn to be gracious. But we also learn about difference, and accepting people as different without forcing them to change, an education which still much applies to our contemporary Church, where often the rule of 'people like us' still applies. If this is the case, no wonder others do not find within our doors the respite they are seeking.

Community and service are markers of God's economy of generosity, a reminder that God's Kingdom is not about scarcity, or a careless neglect of the weakest, but of lavish indulgence, and of God's love for human beings.

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**Good Friday** is an altogether tougher scene, but I still want to suggest that our Good Friday liturgy can help us live with and better in these uncertain, anxious and fraught times. But I want to put aside what I find unhelpful in our imaginings on this holy day. Firstly, and I don't want to shock you, the formula that Jesus takes away my sins on the Cross. I've never quite understood how that works, the mechanics as it were, as most of us now have a very limited idea of sin, and they don't seem to be taken away at all. I still sin, and one of my sins is my self-centeredness: so Jesus takes away *my* sins is not particularly helpful.

I am more persuaded by a political interpretation – Jesus the revolutionary, Jesus the Che Guvera of his time, if you've ever seen the famous black and red poster, now with the face of Jesus and the caption *Meek and Mild, As if*. He upset the authorities one too many times and has to pay the price. But this is still a bit like the 'sin argument' except applying now to our communal or structural wickedness. Now I do think that both forms of sin, intertwined as they are, individual and communal are important – and we should be honest and seek forgiveness which God always offer us through the Church – but I think the Good Friday narrative and imagery are about so much more, and so much deeper.

For me, Good Friday reframes or re-imagines the experience of human suffering and death, and it is that new interpretation which speaks into our present situation. Let me say more.

When Jesus is handed over to the Roman authorities, there is a significant shift. Until then Jesus has been in charge, as it were, of his actions: his decisions to teach, to heal, to exorcise, to remonstrate with religious figures, above all to tell stories, have been his own; he has largely taken the initiative, he has 'done the doing', in more colloquial language. After his betrayal, he is done unto, he is at the mercy of Pilate, of Jewish leaders, of soldiers, he is a passive figure. Now it's interesting here that the words 'passive' and 'Passion' come from the same Latin root meaning 'to suffer', so that Jesus' suffering and his being done unto are the same thing. He moves from relatively powerful to completely powerless as he is forced to carry his cross through the streets, a journey we followed only this morning.

In our present situation, especially in relation to the scenes of a traumatised Gaza or distraught families of Israeli hostages, or displaced Ukrainian children, one of our

frustrations, something which nags like toothache, is our inability to do anything very much. We are so used to being in charge of our lives, and sometimes in charge of other people's lives (although husbands/wives/partners resist it), that it's very hard when we can't do anything; it's hard to move towards powerlessness. But that is exactly what Jesus did, and depending on your reading of this, he chose it or it was forced on him, but that's where he ended up. The person whom we believe is the best way to God, who opens up holiness to us, was at the end of his life, the least powerful – even the maid who argues with Peter outside the High Priest's house had more agency than Jesus. It is not surprising therefore for the followers of Jesus to feel and experience the same as Jesus. He invites us to give up our strength, to become helpless and powerless.

At the end of his life, we also have a renewed understanding of the meaning of the word Emmanuel – and as I say this, I can hear the Christmas carols and almost taste the turkey again, but Emmanuel 'God is with us' is far too important just for the birth of Jesus. God is with us all through, to the depths of our being and to the end of our lives and beyond. So as Jesus suffers – betrayal, sham trial, injustice, torture, execution – so does God; and as we suffer in all different sorts of ways, including our fears and anxieties, our insecurities and our uncertainties, so does God, for in the person of Jesus, God is with us. In the person of Jesus whom God loves as a child, God is still with us.

Now I know that at the immediate point of suffering, that argument does not 'cut the mustard' as they say. To take a trivial example, when I have hit my thumb rather than the nail, I do not immediately think about Christian theology, but may need a plaster, or something similar. But a bit later, and this applies to more serious matters than thumbs and nails, I may begin to ask myself: Was there any point to that? Was it simply random? Did it mean anything? And the answer here is not that the Crucifixion of Jesus is a solution or provides a cosmic sticking plaster, but that God-with-us in the suffering gives another meaning, a reframing, one which may keep us from depression or despair.

I want to add one final thing: we are often too quiet about our feelings, and the scene we are given with the women weeping at the foot of the Cross may be less helpful than some of the verses in the Psalms. If we feel like crying out to God, railing against the injustice of the world to others or ourselves, we should do so. Rather shout at God than kick the cat – God is certainly big enough to take it, and our Jewish forebears had no hesitations here. And many people often complain to a God they otherwise hardly believe in. Here is a third re-imagining of the Cross of Jesus: less *Stabat mater dolorosa*, and more Dylan Thomas *Do not go gentle into that good night / Rave, rave against the dying of the light*.

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I am speaking at this point in our liturgy almost before our Easter Rites have begun, because I want us to stay in **Holy Saturday** a bit longer. Jesus has been taken down from the Cross, hastily buried in a tomb, and all had departed to mark the Sabbath before they were deemed unclean. This was the end – an end of dreams and hopes, an end to a new way of thinking, a new relationship with God, the dismal end of a friend whom they had loved very much,

whom they considered to be special, who instead had suffered a most degrading death, and very much a death.

We rush on from Jesus in the tomb much too quickly, fill the day in our parishes with replacing all the regular ornaments and decorating the Church for Easter, so I ask you to dim your eyes a bit to the colour around us, to return a moment to the greyness of the tomb and its desolation, for this is what may speak into our anxieties and uncertainties more than Easter lilies.

I want to suggest to you the shorter ending of St Mark's Gospel is helpful for where we are now. This is still, just about, a resurrection Gospel in Chapter 16. The two Marys and Salome go to the tomb with spices to anoint the body wondering who will roll away for them the large stone which was placed at the entrance. They arrive, find the stone rolled back and in place of Jesus a young man who tells them Jesus is resurrected and is going ahead of them to Galilee. It is the women's reaction that is significant here: 'So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.' If this had been the only Gospel account, we would not have any Gospel at all, and probably no Christian faith as we know it. But I think we can all feel with the women: their terror and amazement reduced them to shocked silence.

Their lives have probably been disrupted already by simply being friends with Jesus, then they have faced his trial and execution; perhaps they have doubted their faith in him. And now, almost unbelievably, they face further upset – maybe he is alive after all. Their worlds have been turned upside down, tossed round as if in a spin dryer, and we expect them to react with calm joy. Hardly.

The challenge of living with inconclusiveness is a hard one for us. Spend a moment trying to remember how it felt to be waiting for exam results as a child or a student, waiting for someone to come home at night when they seem to be much later than normal, waiting for the doctor or hospital to contact us – sometimes it seems as if even bad news is better than no news. Nationally, I think this is some of what drove the final part of the Brexit process – we could not abide any more to be in the limbo where we had appeared to have fallen. Almost any outcome was better than no outcome.

Holy Saturday has a hard lesson to teach us which is why we try and shorten it, why we reach for what happens next. We don't really want to be the disciples who were grieving because they didn't know what happened next, but that is how it feels at present. We don't know what will happen in Gaza or Ukraine, or between the US and China; we don't even know what will happen to us or our families. Sometimes we shore up our defences, we blame others. How much better to sit awhile with the disciples imagining them not knowing, and then at a suitable moment recall that we do know, and that there is resurrection, and our trust in God is well-placed.

And so that's where we're moving now.

## Easter Sunday

When I was 17, I went on a very successful French exchange to Montpellier in the South of France. Xavier was 18, quite bit more mature than I was, and like most of his age group, was the proud owner of a 125 scooter. With some of his friends, we had a tour of the centre of France in the Auvergne (*la France profonde*), riding these scooters with me as pillion passenger. On return we had a number of trips to the local beach, also using these bikes. On one occasion, coming round a corner on the slip road, we skidded on some loose gravel, came to a complete halt, and I fell off. I was wearing a helmet, but only shorts and a T-shirt, and landed on my knees. There was quite a lot of blood, and we limped home (me almost literally), with a gratifying number of other young riders stopping us and making sure we were ok. Luckily, one of his mates' fathers was a doctor, and I was patched up, with that wonderful red iodine solution which was so French. I bear the scars to this day.

One of the principal post-resurrection scenes is Jesus' encounter with Thomas. "Show me your hands and your feet, show me your scars, and I will believe you." Jesus does just that, his resurrected body is not miraculously made whole, but he carries the marks of his suffering. So I tell you this story about a minor bike accident not to compare myself to Jesus, but rather to remind us that we all continue to carry the scars from our previous woundedness – and the mental scars of course are mostly invisible.

Over the previous three days, I have been trying to set out a case for how the events of the Triduum can help us in their liturgy to cope better with the anxiety, fear and uncertainty in the world and our lives at present. So Maundy Thursday suggests how importance is community (the community of the disciples sharing a meal) and service (Jesus washing their feet); Good Friday reframes this human suffering as something God is involved with intimately, in the suffering of his Son, which is his own pain. And I have also indicated that a human revolt against suffering, or against any kind of God who relishes it or needs it, is to be encouraged. 'Rave, rave against the dying of the light', as Dylan Thomas wrote. Holy Saturday is the real moment or event for where we are now: Jesus in the tomb, the disciples scattered, afraid, deeply dispirited – and we often do not dwell in this space very long because it's so uncomfortable; but I think it speaks powerfully to us now.

Which takes us to today, Easter Day. I think one of my bits of learning over the years is that although we celebrate Easter today liturgically, and I'm delighted we do it and with how we do it, the timetable for our own Easters is much more variable, and cannot in any way be manufactured. If we have suffered bereavement or any other significant loss or trauma, our bodies and minds will dictate when we can really say we have encountered new life – there is often a lot of Lent, Holy Week, Holy Saturday especially, before we arrive at a true Easter.

I have stressed the value of the previous days because the disciples were of course unaware of what was going to happen, though they may have had their fears and suspicions. We know there is a happy ending as it were, but they didn't. So it's worth putting ourselves into their shoes, walking with them in their disquiet, to help us with our disquiet.

But then Easter Day comes, and the promises Jesus made turn out to be all true. He does come back to life and in his coming to life, we come to life too. That is our resurrection now, eternal life now, as St John described, not simply in the world to come. There is no magic wand in all of this, and sometimes our hope is not very full, a clinging on by our finger tips, a miracle that we have not let go – and that is faith rather than certainty. And this can simply be an act of will, a decision to be hopeful because that is what faith teaches, rather than feeling hopeful.

This, I think, is one of the purposes of celebrating Easter Day liturgically even if we may not actually feel it, even though our minds and bodies are still in Lent or still in the tomb with the dead Jesus. Easter reminds us that there is hope, and that our faith is based on the hope that we cannot see, but for which we are nevertheless grateful. So we become a thankful people and Alleluia is our song.