

sermons preached at the

Sacred Easter Triduum

13, 14, 16 April 2017

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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NB: These sermons are like the liturgy of the Easter Triduum, a single liturgy which takes three days to pray.

the vulnerability of friendship

HOLY THURSDAY

The first thing to do as we embark on this Sacred Easter Triduum is to remind ourselves that this is *not* an historical exercise. Perhaps it seems too obvious. Yet I think we do forget that the Paschal Mystery is only partly about Jesus of Nazareth. More importantly, it's about Incarnation, about Word becoming flesh, and the fullness, the completion of all flesh.

And that means it's about us; our flesh, our completion. It is we who are completing Christ's sufferings,¹ as St Paul puts it, we who are to undergo the great Pascha.

This why the words and actions and symbols of this Easter Triduum are about God, yes, but also about us, about human experience. The fullness of being human is now visible and accessible and accomplishable, because there is One who has gone this way ahead of us. As we will hear later in the darkness, "I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and, in fact, will do greater works than these".²

And the Pascha begins on this holy night around a table; the table of the *Lord*. "An upper room did our *Lord* prepare".

The *Lord*. The world was full of 'lords' exercising authority over others, getting what they want, by force if necessary. So whether we are aware of it or not, when we invoke this word 'Lord', *domination* is its underlying paradigm. Everyone knew that then, and we know it remains so now.

But as we gather around *this* Lord's table the very meaning of 'Lord' is being transformed, transfigured; we could even say trans-substantiated! "You call me Lord and Teacher – and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. [For] unless I wash you, you have no share with me."³ In this teaching and demonstration, Jesus makes it clear that *it's about us*; that we ourselves might become the new humanity, might be transformed, trans-substantiated even!

In this action we see that the world's domination paradigm is subverted by the One who stoops down very low; towel around the waist, kneeling, handling the lowliest and most despised of body parts.⁴ Lordship after Jesus can no longer mean domination; and all the clever scheming and manipulation, as well as the aggression and violence, that goes with that territory. In an earlier sign, Jesus overthrows the money-changers' tables in the temple.⁵ A little later, as prisoner before Pilate, Jesus declares, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were from this world my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Judeans."⁶

Little wonder Jesus so threatened people; for the domination paradigm has always been the currency of empires and nation states and corporations, and institutions everywhere.

But this night we are shown what is the true meaning of Lord-ship; taking the lowest place, kneeling down, washing feet. "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing"⁷ – classic domination paradigm – "but I have called you *friends*".

¹ Colossians 1:24

² John 14:12

³ John 13:13-14,8

⁴ John 13:4,5

⁵ John 2:15

⁶ John 18:36

⁷ John 15:15

This is the new paradigm, the ‘new commandment’;⁸ the paradigm of Lord as companion, as *friend*. Lord as ‘friend’? As we all know from our own experience, the currency of friendship is self-giving, openness, transparency, humility, self-disclosure; and above all, vulnerability. Friendship is therefore very costly. Unlike the currency of the domination paradigm – which is always scheming, manipulative, transactional, self-interested, and self-protective – friendship is reckless and deeply vulnerable.

Holy Week dramatically reveals Jesus as the kind of Lord who is friend, and thus vulnerable. “One of you will betray me”.⁹ ‘Son of God’, yes, ‘Word who was in the beginning with the Father’,¹⁰ yet vulnerable, open to betrayal. Incredibly, to his betrayer, the false friend, Jesus says, “Friend, do what you are here to do”.¹¹

It is astonishing to us that betrayal lies at the heart of what we call the Christian **εὐαγγέλιον** *evangelion*, ‘good news’. Betrayal is the very means which brings about this paradigm shift from domination to friendship, from grasping to vulnerability. Betrayal, it turns out, is part of the saving means! “The Son of Humankind goes as it is written of him”.¹² St Paul will declare that God sent “a messenger of Satan to keep me from being too exalted”.¹³ Though in the ‘form of God’, Jesus’ message and meaning is the self-emptying way,¹⁴ the Paschal Mystery.

I said the Pascha is about us, about we who gather to undertake this liturgy. Because of this sacred night human history – indeed the unfolding creation itself – can never be the same again. What we see this night is revealed as *our* experience; our common human path of transformation from domination to vulnerable friendship. “Let the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus”.¹⁵

This is not a mental exercise – as though we were preparing for an exam – but means nothing less than *undergoing ourselves* what the Great Friend undergoes; becoming ourselves transformed into the pattern of Christ, vulnerable to betrayal and death.

The implications will become clear in the Garden. “Put your sword away”, Jesus tells his followers, “All who take the sword will perish by the sword”.¹⁶

Of course, it seems impossible to us to live this Christ-like way;¹⁷ foolish, or reckless even! Indeed, Christ crucified is “a stumbling block to Jews, and foolishness to Gentiles”.¹⁸ Because of which, many will turn back,¹⁹ regressing to the apparent safety of the old domination paradigm.

But this night is ‘gospel’ precisely because we gather at the Table of One who shows us how we are transformed from the domination paradigm. The Host at the Table invites us instead to participate in the Lord who has the words of life.²⁰

And this Lord, whose way is the vulnerability of friend, invites us to watch and pray and remain with him;²¹ even through the darkest of nights, even if betrayed with a kiss.



⁸ John 14:34

⁹ John 13:21

¹⁰ John 1:2

¹¹ Matthew 26:49-50; John 13:27 “Do quickly what you are here to do.”

¹² Matthew 26:24; Mark 14:21; Luke 22:22

¹³ 2 Corinthians 12:7

¹⁴ Philippians 2:6-7

¹⁵ Philippians 2:5

¹⁶ Matthew 26:52; John 18:11

¹⁷ Matthew 17:20, 19:26

¹⁸ 1 Corinthians 1:23

¹⁹ John 6:66

²⁰ John 6:68

²¹ Matthew 26:36,38,40-41

the freedom of nothing

GOOD FRIDAY

On this great and good Friday, we listen again to the Passion of *our Lord*, we touch the Cross of *our Lord*. What does it mean for Jesus to be the crucified ‘*Lord*’, the *Lord* and Saviour?

Last night, at the beginning of this sacred Triduum, we gathered, literally, around the table of the Lord, and reflected on the kind of ‘*Lord*’ who stooped very low; touching the most despised part of the body, washing his disciples’ feet.

In this shocking action – which so appalled Peter – Jesus overturned the domination paradigm. And so we found ourselves in the presence of the Lord-ship of *friend-ship*; intimacy, inter-relatedness, union, above all, vulnerability, who invites us away from “seeking to secure our identity and safety”.²² And the cost of friendship is exposure to betrayal; even with a kiss!

What kind of Lord *are* we looking for on this Good day? Are we looking for a supernatural ‘lord’ who disrupts the laws of physics in order to suit our desires? Are we looking for the kind of politically-savvy lord so familiar in our world; a pseudo-lord who schemes and plots and manipulates, and when necessary destroys his enemies? Are we looking for a lord who will suffer *instead of us*, who will be our substitute so that we don’t have to take responsibility for ourselves? Or, are we looking for a Lord who will reward us for ‘keeping ourselves nice’?

Such lords are common enough; *within* the church, as outside it. Holy Thursday once-and-for-all exposed and rejected every kind of pseudo-lord.

Moreover, on this Good Friday the price of what that means is shockingly revealed: condemned, handed over, stripped, flogged, crucified, and buried. Now we see the nature of true Lord-ship.

It goes without saying that Lord-ship of this kind reveals an image of God we neither expect, nor want!

I’ve been saying that it’s about us. For Lord-ship reveals true humanity; the shape and meaning of every human becoming. When his disciples wanted to be guaranteed places of prominence in the kingdom he not only refused to grant their wish – he invited them into his baptism, to drink his cup.²³

What makes this day ‘good’, then, is that, defying our expectations, the Lord consciously and willingly becomes what our tradition has called a Nobody, a Nothing,²⁴ falling into the earth and dying, like the seed.²⁵ Unless he consented to become the Nothing, he could not become the All.²⁶

The mystery is that Christ *is* indeed the Lord of All – but only because his Lord-ship arises from *absolute Nothing*. The living bread is consumed, rendered into nothingness, we might even say ‘annihilated’; and by this annihilation becomes the very means of sustaining life for those to whom he gives himself. “Who eats this bread, will live forever”;²⁷ whose self-emptying²⁸ is the life-stream of blood and water.²⁹

This, then, is what is ‘accomplished’³⁰ on Good Friday: Lord-ship as Nothingness, the Nothingness from which all things miraculously come into being.³¹ Christ hangs, willingly, consciously, on this point – waiting, even in total despair³² – in a state of non-being. He did not know; just as we do not know where this will go. Or not!

Jesus reveals this non-being as true freedom. “The message of the cross is that pain and death may only be overcome from within, not from above. The faith that emanates from this cross is a faith that enables its disciples to follow the crucified God into the heart of the world’s darkness.”³³

This Nothingness, in which we see true Lordship, must be experienced, undergone, enfleshed. The Pascha is about us. Veneration at the Cross in this light is silent, bodily consenting to this Nothing-ness ourselves; when we consent to falling into the ground and dying, when we submit to non-being.

Veneration at the Cross will have its outer consequences *when its work is done*; which we call resurrection life, yes. But it is strictly-speaking the mystery hidden since the beginning,³⁴ an inner reality, a reality of the soul; in which the work itself, not the outcome, is the main event. No one knows the day nor the

²² Sarah Bachelard, *Experiencing God in a Time of Crisis*, Miami: Convivium, 2012, p74.

²³ Matthew 20:22, Mark 10:37-39, John 18:11

²⁴ Psalm 22:6

²⁵ John 12:24

²⁶ See Marguerite Porete (Ellen L Babinsky, *trans.*), *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, New York: Paulist Press, 1993, pp192-193.

²⁷ John 6:58b

²⁸ Philippians 2:7

²⁹ John 19:34

³⁰ John 19:30

³¹ John 1:3

³² Matthew 27:46

³³ Douglas John Hall, cited in Sarah Bachelard, *Experiencing God in a Time of Crisis*, Miami: Convivium, 2012, p56.

³⁴ Colossians 1:26

hour.³⁵ The traditional dogmatic symbol of Christ's descent into hell for three days is a symbolic expression for this Nothingness-Lordship; the Being who arises from non-being; only at the appointed time.

This is Christ's gift to us. This is true freedom; the freedom of being nothing. And it is Christ's invitation to us; the meaning of our baptism into his death and resurrection, the meaning of our humanity. Christ does not ask us to carry *his* cross – but to take up *our own*.³⁶ Only the conscious willing individual can consent to undergoing the evolutionary and salvific work of the experience into Nothingness – abiding with Christ the Nothingness-Lord.

Therefore we touch the cross not to remember history, but as our faltering yet genuine desire to go this way of completion and evolutionary salvation ourselves; and to discover the evangelical mystery, the astonishing freedom, that those who lose their life will find it.³⁷



the joy of adoration EASTER DAY

During this Triduum I have been reflecting on that four-letter word 'Lord'; so central to Christian thinking, praying, and acting, and so crucial to unlocking the mystery and the meaning of human being and becoming. And I've been saying that the Pascha is about us; *our* undergoing, *our* human becoming, in the Lord

And on this most holy morning, as light pierces darkness, we celebrate the passing over from life to death, of our *Lord* Jesus Christ. Jesus of Nazareth is *not here*;³⁸ but Christ is the risen *Lord*. With Mary Magdalene, on this eighth day of creation we are discovering that Lord-ship is no-where; and yet everywhere!³⁹

During this sacred Triduum we have been discovering that our usual expectations of what it means to be 'Lord' are so overturned. For our prayer and our acting in the world continue to betray how close we are to Peter – whose refusal to have his feet washed constitutes resistance to Jesus' liberation from the domination paradigm – and all Jesus' followers' deep abhorrence of the Lord's Nothingness.

Yet we should not be surprised by our deep resistance to Paschal Mystery. From the point of view of our individual ego consciousness, there is something profoundly contrary to nature in the kind of Lord who refuses the domination paradigm; in this *Nothing* Lord. I must add that I am speaking personally.

If we have struggled in the spiritual life, we do know that holding on to life amounts to losing it.⁴⁰ We do know that the domination paradigm in fact diminishes the one who apparently has the power.⁴¹ We do know from the witness of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus *the Lord* – and from this queen-of-feast's dazzling Paschal Light – what is the way to the spiritual evolution for which we long, and towards which the gospel gestures. And of course, we *do* desire to experience the resurrection life enacted by our baptism.

Yet we resist mightily being suspended in nothing-ness. We desire to be the All; yet we mightily resist being the Nothing. Terror and amazement seizes us too,⁴² and we become very afraid.⁴³ We still want a dominating Lord to swoop in and fix everything up. The Lord remains a 'fantasy fashioned in our own image'.⁴⁴

In reflecting on the Sacrament, Teilhard de Chardin observed, "I suddenly realized how extraordinary and how disappointing it was. How could Christ be at once so close to my heart and so far from it, so closely united to my body and *so remote from my soul*?"⁴⁵ The Lord is so infinitely close; and yet so infinitely remote!

What is this remoteness, this distance, this separation, this inability to *fully* assimilate the Body of Christ, even though we eat at his resurrection table? I think we feel this acutely on Easter Day; which intensifies our sense of the gap. In those striking and hard words to Mary Magdalene: 'Do not cling'.⁴⁶

³⁵ Matthew 24:36-50; 25:13

³⁶ Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23

³⁷ Matthew 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; John 12:25

³⁸ Matthew 27:6

³⁹ John 20:17.

⁴⁰ Mark 8:35; Matthew 16:25; Luke 9:24; John 12:25

⁴¹ Luke 16:19-31

⁴² Matthew 14:26

⁴³ Matthew 28:4,5,10

⁴⁴ Kevin O'Shea CSSR, Reflections on 'Gethsemane'

⁴⁵ Teilhard de Chardin P, 'Christ in the World of Matter', in *Hymn of the Universe*, London: Fontana, 1970, p48. Emphasis added.

⁴⁶ John 20:17

For one thing, Paschal Mystery takes time to evolve in us; we still cannot fully assimilate the Living Word, the Lord of life who emerges only *from the depths of a tomb*,⁴⁷ whose being the Nothing is the *precondition for being the All*.

Reflecting further on this mystery, I have been wondering if perhaps our feeling of separation from the risen Lord – this seemingly-infinite distance – is somehow *necessary*. Yes, necessary. Like everything else in the cosmos, we are ourselves quantum fields and evolutionary process; that which is accomplished in Christ is creation groaning in travail,⁴⁸ remaining to be brought to completion. “The *full extent and density of the years* which still [remain to us], to be lived and divinized”⁴⁹.

We forget that this, too, is Jesus’ reality, his actual lived human experience. He did *not* know whether all his effort would make any difference.⁵⁰

If this was Jesus’ experience, then it must be ours also. We must die in order to live. We do not know if our life’s work will amount to anything. The outcome can neither be seen; nor guaranteed. That’s the Christian *evangelion*, which we reaffirm this morning at the Font.

Therefore, we celebrate with you, Lyle, in your baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection. For we share with you, in faith and hope and love, in the ‘disappointing distance’, the ‘painful separation’, the apparent loss of every fantasy about ‘the Lord’,⁵¹ which, remarkably, turns out to be the “liberating dynamic of dispossession.”⁵² True freedom, we discovered on Good Friday, in fact arises from Nothing!

With you, because we are together growing in Christ, we too must go this ‘narrow way that leads to life’.⁵³ The *εὐαγγέλιον evangelion* is that the loss of all fantasy about God, turns out to be the gate to longing, to our deepest desire, our yearning-towards-completion, our fulfilment in Love.

Finally, we celebrate with you that this is what our tradition calls *adoration*. “God approaches our minds by receding from them”, wrote Thomas Merton, in a profound resurrection affirmation. “We can never fully know [God] if we think of [God] as an object of capture, to be fenced in by the enclosure of our own ideas. [For] we know [God] better after our minds have let [God] go. Every [person] becomes the image of the God [they] adore.”⁵⁴ We become what we eat; and we become what we adore!

Thus even our feeling of separation from the risen Lord is itself the work of spiritual evolution, accomplished, ultimately, by the work of adoration, by which we become truly free. The Christian gospel is not believing impossible things; but the discovery of true freedom, through adoration.

The Pascha invites us into the joy of adoration, which is freedom. Adoration is our primary work! By unexpected means of dispossession, betrayal, loss, death, descent into the abyss – by hope, the “conviction of things not seen”,⁵⁵ nor guaranteed, culminating in the breaking light of the eighth day of creation, drawn, finally, into adoration on a cosmic scale, in fire and water and oil, in dark and light, in bells and music and incense, in Word and Bread and Wine – every person is a new creation, each of us becoming an image of what we adore!

Christ is risen, yes! And Christ is risen, in us. Alleluia!



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⁴⁷ John 20:9

⁴⁸ Romans 8:22

⁴⁹ Teilhard de Chardin P, p50.

⁵⁰ “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34

⁵¹ Kevin O’Shea CSSR, Reflections on ‘Gethsemane’

⁵² Sarah Bachelard, p74.

⁵³ Matthew 7:13-14

⁵⁴ Thomas Merton, *No man is an Island*, New York: Harvest Books, 1955, p239.

⁵⁵ Hebrews 11:1