

Staveley Parish Church
2009 Holy Week: Addresses after Mass

Fr Stanley Monkhouse

Monday 6 April 2009

The events in tonight's gospel story take place in before the Palm Sunday procession we recalled yesterday. I'm going to take both stories together, in the Biblical order: that is, tonight's story first, then the Palm Sunday story after it.

Here are some themes that strike me from this journey and tonight's gospel.

- Preparing for death: Mary's anointing Jesus with oil normally reserved for anointing the dead
- Hypocrisy and dissimulation: Judas pretending to object to the waste of oil because of what it might have bought the poor, whereas in fact he wanted it for himself.
- Jesus doing the unexpected: riding a donkey is not the way a king would be expected to arrive.
- Jesus **facing** the future squarely: his cheerfulness, and the crowd's acclamation. Faces are important in this story.

First, preparing for death

We live in a society that refuses to look death full in the face. People try and pretend it will not happen. They go to great lengths to try and delay it, even when it's obviously inevitable. We spend money on seeking a cure for this or that disease as if there is some hope that we can live for ever. We forget that one day, even if we are cured of this or that disease, tomorrow we will die of something else.

This always leads to trouble. If you pretend it won't happen, you can't set things straight before you go. You are left with unfinished business. If you can't set things straight, you are left with regret and guilt. You can't say that you wished you'd not said so-and-so, and you can't say, before it's too late, what you should have said years ago. And all that is the overwhelming cause of grief and weeping and family tensions at funerals. It's in contrast to the death of a friend of mine recently, who knew she was dying, told the world, and settled what very good, and characteristically witty it was too. Our refusal to be straightforward about death results in grave disappointments.

For six months of my life I worked in a children's hospital just off the Brixton High Road in south London. I saw there babies with incurable conditions having operation after operation, and I was required to insert drips into their tiny veins whilst seeing their eyes looking at me. I was gravely distressed at the inhumanity and cruelty of it. I plucked up the courage to suggest that baby Anthony should be allowed to die with dignity. The reaction was swift: I was reprimanded in no uncertain terms. He died the next week after yet another operation. It is not my intention to start a debate tonight on end-of-life issues—that's for another time maybe—but I'm using this as an illustration of how many of us refuse to confront one of the realities of animal existence on this planet. Death comes to all of us. By pretending otherwise we cause grief for ourselves and for those that love us.

This sanitisation of death, this refusal to look it full in the face, is partly a consequence of the urbanisation of the population. As well as estates and suburbs, my parishes cover over 25 sq miles of rural Derbyshire. Rural folk have a robust attitude to death. They see it day by day. Animals are killed so that we might eat. One of my churchwardens thinks nothing of shoving her arm up a cow's rear end to pull out a dead calf. Now, I acknowledge that my attitude to death may be more peculiar than most: not only was **I** brought up in a farming village in Cumberland, but for 25 years I was using human cadavers to teach anatomy: cutting them up, examining them and handling them.

However unusual my attitude to death might be, I'm convinced that our attitude to death needs realigning. Tonight's Gospel and the Palm Sunday procession seem to say likewise. Our Lord faces death full in the face. Face: earlier in the gospel Jesus came down from a mountain with a shining **face**. Then he set his **face** to go to Jerusalem. And now acknowledging to Judas—I've more to say about him tomorrow—that he is being anointed for death, just as many priests have anointed people for death. The Easter message is that death leads to new life. If you want to build on a new site, it is wise to clear it of rubble so that good foundations can be laid. This is new life following death of the old. And so, of course, is the resurrection story.

Biologically speaking, death is part of life. The cells of our bodies are dying all the time, and new life replaces them. Skin cells are constantly being shed and replaced. Blood cells past their sell-by date are replaced all the time. There are lots of other examples, but here is a startling example of the necessity of cell death.

When a fetus is developing in the uterus, the hands and feet start off as spade-like things, a bit like fists. You might think that fingers and toes grow out from the spades, but you'd be wrong. What happens is that rather than digits growing out, four strips of cells are programmed to die, leaving digits remaining between them. If not enough cells die, we get webbed fingers and toes. If more strips die we get more fingers than usual. Here is another example. When a bone is fractured and reset, the two ends are rarely aligned properly. The body copes with this by killing off bone cells in the wrong place, and laying down new ones where needed.

Biology has no hesitation in killing off the old in order that the new can flourish. We can't move on if we try to preserve the past. That is why, despite my love of architecture and liturgy, I oppose the conservationist lobby. We must face death when necessary. We can't engage with the present if we refuse to accept the inevitability of death, because we will be tempted to put off things that need attention before it's too late.

I am calling for honesty and clarity of vision. And this, I think, is what Our Lord called for throughout his ministry. Yesterday and today, Our Lord stands up to face the future full on. He stands at the gates of the city, the city of wrong. Susan and I were in Bethany last January. Although it's not possible to do now, because of Israeli so-called security measures, a mile up the hill from Bethany brings you to the top of the Mount of Olives, and keep going down and you pass the way of the Donkey ride past the garden of Gethsemane to the city gates. We walked some of that walk, downhill towards the city gate.

At the time Our Lord was riding a colt into Jerusalem from one direction, from the opposite direction, history books tell us, another procession was arriving. At Passover the Jewish people celebrate deliverance from the *Egyptian* oppressors. But here they are now under *Roman* oppressors. A recipe for civil unrest. The Romans were nervous. So the Roman governor rode to Jerusalem from the 'capital' Caesarea on the coast, with military reinforcements in case of trouble. Pilate's procession, arriving from the west, was a procession of Roman imperial power. Jesus entered the city from the east in another procession. Whereas Pilate rides a war horse, Jesus rides a donkey. The contrast: Jesus against Pilate, non-violence of the God's kingdom against violence of empire. Mockery of imperial power. Turning the tables of convention as much as turning the tables in the Temple. There's a scene in Attenborough's film *Gandhi* which always catches my attention, and that is when the ship docks in Bombay, some British bigwig is disembarking in full dress uniform to the sounds of bands and military display. At the same time, Gandhi dressed as a local is disembarking further up the quayside. The crowds are with Gandhi, not the Viceroy. In Jerusalem, the crowds are with the itinerant preacher from Galilee.

I wonder which procession we will be part of? Will we part of the naked emperor's procession that lusts for power, that fawns over those who have it? that fiddles expenses claims? Will we like them go for the puffed up image like an overstuffed balloon that will soon burst? Or will we be part of the procession of straightforwardness, of humility, of service? Will we be in the procession that faces stark reality, that embraces death in order that something much more glorious can rise? Death of worldly ambition perhaps. This issue affects me: do I accept Diocesan responsibility because it makes me look good in the eyes of the institution, or because the work interests me? Death of attitudes that tether us to the past. This is something that afflicts me personally in all sorts of ways, and that affects all clergy: try proposing something that requires a change in church furnishings and see how much of your anatomy is intact 10 seconds later. This is all understandable biologically: our memories are important to us for species preservation. The problem is that we often allow ourselves to stagnate because of them—keeping things the same as they were when we were children.

Facing the future mindfully means killing, letting go of, all that holds us back. It can be very painful. We begin to see ourselves as others saw us. We realise that we are not as good as we thought we were. We realise how we deceived ourselves and the truth was not in us. We need to grieve our lost attitudes, our lost expectations, or lost dreams. We need to let go of what we want, or wanted, and accept the grace of God to resurrect us. We must die in order to live, as Christ Jesus died in order to live. Death of our self-obsession enables us to rise

As larks, harmoniously

And sing this day Thy victories:

Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

As I grow older, I look back on some of the things I used to be so passionate about and wonder what it was about them that so obsessed me. Obsession is the right word, because these passions blinkered my vision and limited my action. A couple of humdrum examples. I once had a huge collection of books: they were my friends. I came to see that they limited me. Not only did they cost a lot of money, they also dictated the type of house we could move to. And after all, when one has sucked the marrow out of a book, one might as well pass it on! (How many books do we all have for show, unread and likely to remain so?). In my teens,

cathedral music introduced me to beauty, lifting me from a drab village existence. I allowed it to rule my choices for too long. Now it sustains me without, I hope, dictating to me.

These are not evil things in themselves (though many clergy seem to harbour evil thoughts about church musicians—or is it the other way round?) but they limited me, they narrowed my vision. They stole some of me and prevented me from being fully me, in a similar way to that of any addiction. I am still afflicted by such things—I suspect we all are—but now I'm slightly more aware of the symptoms of the addiction. A friend of mine, not in any way conventionally religious, talks in much the same terms. As we get older we find ourselves attached to fewer and fewer things—even cathedral music no longer has the hold on me it once did. Our vision becomes less restricted. We are moving into a wide, unfettered place. The view from the road from Sleaford to King's Lynn is an image that I have in mind for this wide view. This notion of being in a wide place is one of the Hebrew images of salvation, and it is one that Jesus teaches. If we die to earthly attachments, we are in this place, and we can focus on what matters: love of God, and love of neighbour. There is much truth in the Buddhist idea that all disease is caused by attachments.

There is a kind of renewal in all this, and the key to it is to live in the present. Our Lord's teaching again and again emphasizes that we need to do just this. Learn from the past certainly, but don't live in it. Look to the future, but don't waste time laying up treasures. Live now, in the moment. This, actually, is what *eternal* means. When we hear 'everlasting life' in church services, we often get the wrong idea, and it would be better, and more accurate a translation of the Greek, to use the word *eternal* rather than *everlasting*. It's not *quantity* or length of time that matters, but *quality*. Eternal, timeless, out of time, in the present, Divine. Thy kingdom come on earth, here and now. Trust the teaching of Jesus: live in the present moment, and do your best in that moment. We can do no more, and we need do no more. In one sense this is easy to do, and in another it's extraordinarily difficult when we are surrounded by the petty irritations that life throws up day by day, when we see the injustice that surrounds us, and when we are governed, as we are, by prejudices and faulty behaviour patterns bred into us by our upbringings. But see all these for what they are, and trust and hope.

If we are to attain eternal life, here and now, we must face death and die to worldly trivia. Having divested ourselves of these burdens we walk off lighter. 'My yoke is easy and my burden is light' – light in both senses, light because of the light of the world, and light because we are less burdened by impedimenta from the past.

Jesus' last hours complete the incarnation. Our Lord gave up a divine dwelling for human frailty, and now he suffers the stripping away of dependence on self to fall into the arms of the divine. 'It is finished'. This is a renunciation that we recall every time the priest utters the consecration prayer at Mass. It is a renunciation that we are called to join in these five days. And the task for us, sisters and brothers, is to accompany the Lord on his journey of death in order to fall into the arms of the divine.

Tomorrow I start with the Judas Iscariot in us all.

Oremus invicem.