

Maundy Thursday—Brave New World

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia; 1 April 2021

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Exodus 12: 1-4, 11-14; Psalm 116: 1-2, 11-18; 1 Corinthians 11: 23-26; John 13: 1-17, 31b-35

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

On Monday afternoon we were driving back from Sydney after Bishop Bruce Wilson's funeral and we stopped to stretch our legs at one of those rest areas dedicated to Victoria Cross winners. We read the story of a brave corporal in New Guinea who single-handedly attacked three enemy machine gun nests, killing seven Japanese soldiers with bayonet, grenades and machine gun before he lost his own life. We read that his heroic sacrifice spurred on the battalion to achieve its objective.

It's a sobering story, and Australians can be rightly proud of this brave 22-year old who helped us subdue a ferocious and determined enemy.

The shape of his prestigious decoration is based on the cross of Jesus Christ, though legend has it that its metal came from Russian cannon captured at Sevastopol in the Crimea—another fierce war in our endless history of conflict. And God is of course invoked on both sides. Our troops, perhaps fresh from the Eucharist, went over the top in World War 1, to be machine gunned by German soldiers whose belt buckles bore the inscription *Gott mit Uns*—God with us.

Is there no end to this historical back and forth of defending and attacking? One side wins, another loses; prayers of thanksgiving on one side are matched by lament and mourning on the other, or vice versa; crusades and colonial oppression in the name of one God are answered by militant Jihad in the name of another, which in turn spawns a new crusade. It's all on one level, with glimmers of transcendence perhaps but nothing permanent. In a world perceived to be one of scarcity, some fight to secure their advantage while others defend theirs. Survival is the great prize, which is the only victory of life over death that we can imagine.

Friends, it strikes me that the Passover as we see it in our readings tonight charts a path out of this zero-sum game, so that we move from struggling under the constraints of history to a transformation of history, a liberation from its iron law of redemptive violence. And Jesus' actions which we commemorate tonight point the way. Let me tell you what I mean.

The Passover in our Exodus reading is about divine violence. "I am the Lord," says the God of Israel, and I'll demonstrate that by defeating the gods of Egypt, despoiling and traumatizing that Empire for the harm it's inflicted on enslaved Israel. The death of the firstborn recalls the bad old days of pagan child sacrifice, and I suspect the Passover lambs are meant to represent an improvement, from human to animal sacrifice. I note that tonight's psalm portion mentions a sacrifice of Thanksgiving, which represents a further step in the same direction, with no living thing having to get it in the neck. This is the journey of the Old Testament, then—away from sacred violence, and from shed blood as God's preferred lubricant for history.

The Eucharist and the foot washing are profound signs that this shift of theological and spiritual understanding has been completed, though tonight's epistle and Gospel still need to remind us of this unlikely-seeming truth. In 1 Corinthians tonight, Paul tells us that the Eucharist has been handed on in the Church from its very beginning, testifying that Jesus' self-giving, flesh and blood, announces a new phase in Israel's story with God. Here a transcendent perspective makes its presence felt at last in a new, universal Passover, which ends the sacrificial curse of history.

Then in John's Gospel we have the foot washing, and Peter's reaction to it, with Jesus' teaching about its significance. It's very clear in this passage that Jesus is fully aware of his divine mission in going to the cross, and the countercultural nature of his greatness is prefigured when he washes the disciples' feet. It's a theatrical display of humiliation and powerlessness, as Peter's shock and affront reveals, and a foretaste of greater humiliations to come so soon after.

Because the foot washing is meant as a pointer to the cross, like the last supper, and to Jesus' handing over of his life in powerlessness before the iron law of history. There's to be no violent resistance, no hedging of bets, no playing along with history's usual game. And why? Because only by completely abandoning the anxiety of violent self-preservation could Jesus lead us past the age-old conviction that there's no way out. We can struggle and flail, duck and weave, and live to fight another day, but ultimately that path leads only downhill into the depths of an abyss. And this abyss is where Jesus went on Easter Saturday, as the old story tells us, to where humanity in its own strength can only ever go.

But then, just when everything is obviously lost, something entirely new happens and humanity's whole imaginative world is turned upside down. God the Father brings Jesus out of this abyss alive, free of history's violent undertow, to triumph over all the false gods, even our own, if what god represents is anxious, violent self-assertion.

Jesus' disciples are told in tonight's Gospel that they now live in a new world. The sign of this new reality is the Church, which is to be distinguished by Christians' love for one another. And what a miracle a patient and forgiving Church represents, in our world of entrenched envy, rivalry and violence. Only Jesus' death and resurrection can make it possible, because only Easter resets human history.

Friends, the Victoria Cross does point in the direction of Jesus' sacrifice, though not unerringly, and it's certainly a reminder of things that matter. But the cross of Easter and the empty tomb and the Eucharist and the Church's loving fellowship are signs of something greater by far, beyond the logic of this world. They take us to a place of genuine transcendence and imperishable victory, in a world where the victories are partial at best, and short-lived.

The Lord be with you ...