

A Sermon preached at Winchester Cathedral for Easter Day Mattins
on Sunday 4th April 2010 by
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Pontius Pilate famously says in St John's Gospel: 'Behold the man' (John 19: 5). With those words he presents Jesus vested in the crown of thorns and the purple robe to his accusers. There is a stone archway over the Via Dolorosa, the traditional 'way of the cross' in Jerusalem, where this episode is remembered. It is called the 'Ecce Homo Arch'.

In one sense Pilate is simply saying: 'Here is the man, I have brought him back to you'. But the force of the words is not lost on St John: 'Behold the Man'. It sums up Christ's exemplary humanity. Like the High Priest elsewhere, Pilate is saying, to the tuned ear, more than he realizes.

For St John that 'exemplary humanity', characteristic of the life of Jesus, is about to be seen writ large in the cross. To those who struggle to understand the cross as in any way presenting exemplary humanity, St John has provided a commentary. The clue is Christ the Servant: it is given us in the account of the Last Supper. Jesus is the one who gives himself for others, for God's sake. He takes off his outer garment, girds himself with a towel and washes his disciples' feet. The foot washing interprets the cross, and presents that supreme sacrifice as the ultimate expression of Jesus' own teaching: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive' (Acts 20: 35). Here is captured our true human identity: 'Behold the man'.

There are signs of a recovery of a vision of exemplary humanity finding its fulfilment in service in our own society. From the Olympic Games the Government is seeking to nurture a new valuing of volunteering. 'One hour volunteered is worth two paid' is the slogan. The idea is to celebrate it on the day that the clocks change and there are 25 hours in the day! Money does not make the world go round, but compassion does.

There is a genuine celebration of our humanity under God on Easter Day. There is something remarkable to affirm about the human creature. Dust glorified. The fire of the image of God. It is the time to pipe while the people dance.

An enigma remains. How did the first disciples, and how did St John, come to see exemplary humanity writ large in the cross? It is pretty well camouflaged in a distressing death on the gallows. How could Jewish followers return to what St Paul calls the 'folly of the cross' and there see a powerful sign of God's activity? The answer lies in Easter Day.

Easter Day alone accounts for the energy that drove the first followers of Jesus to see the cross in a new light. It flagged up a significance which otherwise they would not have understood. It is the resurrection of Christ on Easter Sunday which ensured that the narrative of Christ's final week from Palm Sunday to Easter Day has come down to us in such vivid and connected detail. It is the radiance of the resurrection which has lit up the events of Holy Week. Otherwise, they would have been buried, like every other Passover Pontius Pilate presided over, in the dark obscurity of time's grave.

It is significant that the good news of Christ was, from St Peter's very first sermons in the Acts of the Apostles, presented as 'joined-up thinking'. That is to say, Good Friday and Easter Day were always seen as a single event. Together they present us with the 'paschal mystery'. The earliest summary of the faith we possess is transmitted by St Paul in 1 Corinthians 15: 'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scripture, and he was buried, and he was raised on the third day, and he appeared to Cephas and the twelve' (v: 3 – 5).

The Church counted the resurrection within the span of three days, of which Day One was Good Friday. It was those three days which contained the nucleus of the Gospel. It is not possible to understand Easter Day without being aware of Good Friday, and vice versa.

Easter Day not only accounts for the fact we know about Holy Week and recognise Christ's exemplary humanity in the cross, it is also definitive for our understanding of what was going on in those events. All the events of Holy Week flow from one circumstance to another. The resurrection is a radical break with that flow. It comes not as the crown of humanity's achievements, but as the initiative of God. The resurrection erupts upon the scene. It is unexpected. It is other. It is news. It is gift. It initiates response.

In the Christian estimate there is a move from God to humanity. A contrary current is running. The word spoken in creation is spoken again. The first epistle of Peter may have the last word on this Easter Day: 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead' (1 Peter 1 – 3).