

Lent Compline Talks 2019 St Mary's Kidlington

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Compline, March 10th

1: Via Lucis - the Way of Light

Welcome to the first of this year's Lent Complines. During Lent, the church making group are creating objects and images related to the "Stations of the Resurrection" for display at Easter. We are all familiar with the "Stations of the Cross" - the "Via Crucis" from countless images, but the "Stations of the Resurrection" or "Via Lucis - the Way of Light" are probably less familiar. In fact, the concept is fairly new and was devised only in 1988. The final Station of the traditional Via Crucis (the way of the cross) is the burial of Jesus. For many Christians this is deeply unsatisfactory as a devotional ending because we are the people of the resurrection. Many thousands have been crucified and buried - but only Jesus has been resurrected. We celebrate a two-fold Paschal mystery - on the one hand the suffering and death of Jesus, and on the other, his Resurrection and glorification.

In 1988 Father Palumbieri in Rome proposed a new set of stations centred on the Resurrection and the events following it - in particular the various appearances of Jesus between the Resurrection and the Ascension as attested in the New Testament. The aim was to emphasize the positive, hopeful aspect of the New Testament story, whereas the Stations of the Cross emphasize the suffering. However, because the Christian story moves from the suffering of the cross to the light of the resurrection ("per crucem ad lucem") the two are inseparable.

There are no universally agreed "Stations of the Resurrection" and indeed that great resource - Wikipedia - lists 14 stations, starting with Jesus being raised from the dead and ending with the Holy Spirit descending at Pentecost (some would include Jesus' appearance to Saul on the Damascus Road at the end). We have only 9 Complines and so I have taken the liberty of combining a few stations together, so that we have 9 topics. When I proposed this at a team meeting Joyce (a spouse is always one's most forthright critic) said "You can't spend all Lent talking about things after Easter!". Fortunately, David Meara rescued me by saying that it would be quite appropriate to talk about the fears and emptiness that preceded each appearance. So that is what I will do.

We will, therefore, start with the period just before Jesus was raised from the dead. What a roller-coaster of emotions the disciples of Jesus' close-knit band must have gone through in that week. If we follow Mark's account, starting on Palm Sunday, the disciples were on a real high - Jesus was being feted on the streets of Jerusalem by the crowds, and the official priestly community (with whom Jesus had clashed openly) were apparently doing nothing. Then came 'the cleansing of the temple' where Jesus upset the tables of the money changers and pigeon sellers and drove them out. The disciples and the crowds would still be on a high - the disciples because Jesus was starting to show signs of authoritatively establishing his kingdom on earth - which was their hope, and the poor of the city because Jesus was challenging those who were overcharging for a religious practice that was required by the law). And still the authorities apparently did not react. Then came the trick questions from the Herodians and Sadducees and Jesus triumphed in the argument - what could go wrong? Jesus, and by extension they, were winning!

But suddenly, Jesus tells them to be on their guard; that they will be flogged in the synagogues, arrested and summoned before governors, betrayed even by their own brother or child. He also says there would be distress such as had never been before. What *could* Jesus be talking about? It was all going so well. The supper in the house of Simon the leper also had disturbing mixed messages. It was festival time, they were having a lovely meal with friends but then, when some woman empties some precious oil over Jesus head (which could have been interpreted as an honour) Jesus unexpectedly tells them off for thinking about the poor ("the poor you have with you always") and then talks about anointing his body for burial.

The next meal they shared a similar reversal occurred. The Passover Supper is a solemn but joyous occasion for Jews, and Jesus seemed to be so popular - there's even a room mysteriously available for them. They're again on a high. But then, in the middle of the meal, Jesus announces that one of them will betray him - and they are plunged from joy to dismay. Next came the bread and the wine - so familiar to us - but what on earth can those first disciples have thought when Jesus said that the wine was his blood and that he would never again drink wine on this earth?

It gets worse as they go out to the Mount of Olives, Jesus tells them all that they will fail him at the crucial moment and Peter - with the others all protesting their steadfastness - is told that he will deny even knowing Jesus three times before morning. It gets even darker in Gethsemane - the emotionally exhausted disciples can't even keep awake. Then comes Jesus' arrest spearheaded by one of their own band - what treachery! And they flee. Heights of expectation have turned to total nightmare. Peter finds the courage to go to the high priest's house where Jesus is being tried but there his much-vaunted bravery fails him and he fulfills Jesus' prediction by denying "I know not the man!".

We can scarcely be surprised that none of the disciples are present at the cross - they are in total despair. Only the women have the courage to stand "at a distance" from the cross and watch the end of all their hopes and dreams. They watch Jesus die on the cross condemned by both the religious and state authorities. Small wonder that the disciples are next recorded hiding away behind locked doors - perhaps wondering when the authorities were going to catch up with them, too.

These were all people very familiar with death and burial - at that time they would have seen many people die and be buried - life expectancy for the ordinary people was around 30-40 with many dying in childhood. They would have known exactly what happens when a man is crucified. Joseph of Arimathea seals Jesus' dead body in the tomb he had prepared for himself - it is all finished. Just a few funeral rites to be performed, and so on Sunday morning the women bring spices to anoint the dead body.

But then, during what should have been a terribly sad but rather prosaic task that they had probably done many times before for other dead relatives, their whole world is turned upside down by the most utterly unexpected and incomprehensible but, at the same time, the most crucial event in world history. The stone has gone; Jesus' body has gone; no wonder the women stood there "utterly at a loss". More than that they see a vision of one or two men "in dazzling white garments" who tell them rather matter-of-factly and without much explanation that Jesus has been raised from the dead; to go and tell the disciples; and to go to Galilee where they will meet Jesus again. I suggest it is impossible for us to comprehend what was going through the minds of those women. Small wonder that they ran from the empty tomb in terror. And small wonder that, when they told Jesus' disciples, "the story appeared to them to be nonsense, and the apostles would not believe them".

We cannot understand what occurred at the resurrection in any worldly, physical terms; that is the essence of faith. Our self-examination during Lent may take us - like those disciples - to some of the dark places of the soul, for we have all fallen short in understanding and following our Lord. But, unlike those first disciples, we know the resurrection end of the story, and so we can learn from our Lenten self-examination secure in the knowledge not only that Jesus died for us on the cross, but also that he rose again and, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, can be a constant feature in our own lives, whatever the heights of joy and the lows of despair that we encounter along our way.

