

Lent Compline Talks 2019

St Mary's Kidlington

Prof John Morris

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.

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Compline, March 17th

Lent 2: The resurrected Christ appears to Mary Magdalen

In this series of Lent Complines we are looking at what is now called the 'back story' of the various resurrection appearances of Jesus. The first of these was to Mary Magdalene. In Mark (and in all 4 gospels) we read that Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James, and Salome brought aromatic oils to anoint the body. In Mark there are two different passages - in the first the women are confronted with the empty tomb, are told by a youth in a white robe that Jesus has been raised and to tell the disciples; but they fled 'beside themselves with terror' and say nothing to anyone. Then there is a later added passage that the resurrected Jesus "appeared first to Mary of Magdala from whom he had formerly cast out seven devils. She went and carried the news to his mournful and sorrowful followers, but when they were told that he was alive and that she had seen him they did not believe it" John 20 has a much longer passage in which Mary stays behind, weeping, is approached by a man she thinks must be the gardener who she asks what has been done with the dead body, and it is only when the risen Jesus says "Mary" that she recognises him and says "Rabbuni" (teacher).

There can be few more enigmatic figures in the gospels than Mary Magdalen, or one for whom subsequent generations have attributed such diverse interpretations. What, I wonder is your view of Mary called Magdalene? A woman devoted to Jesus' ministry, a promiscuous sinner, or both? Who was this woman who was clearly VERY close to Jesus - indeed who some claim was married to Jesus - the Cathars in Southern France, Dan Brown's Da Vinci code; a Harvard professor based on a tiny fragment of 6th century Coptic papyrus. Preparing for this talk I've read a fascinating book "The Quest for Mary Magdalene, History and Legend" and been introduced to the incomplete Gnostic "Gospel of Mary" which is very ancient. Then, as now, Mary was a common name and one problem for us is that different Marys have been confused and conflated to produce a composite figure.

In the 4 canonical gospels, Mary Magdalen appears as one of the group of women who travelled round Galilee with the disciples and Jesus and who literally looked after them "of their substance" (Luke 8). First century Palestine was one of the most male-dominated and conservative societies in the ancient world - so the situation of these women must have been very different. They must have had very considerable means, education and freedom. This is confirmed by at least one other woman in the group. Joanna was the wife of Chuza, who was steward and minister of Herod Antipas in his very hellenized court at Tiberias on the north shores of Galilee. Significant parts of Jewish society were hellenized, especially the Sadducees who controlled the temple. Josephus tells us that that Herod was popular among the Jews (much more so than Pilate) and was very interested to learn more about John the Baptist and Jesus and his miracles; he also made allies among the Pharisees in order to limit the power of the Sadducees. Perhaps Mary had a similar background.

Perhaps the thing most of us remember about Mary is the tradition in John that she was the sister of Martha and Lazarus in Bethany who just wanted to listen to Jesus' teaching despite Martha's request for help in the kitchen, and who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and lovingly anointed them with precious oil. We learn two things here - first that Mary was a woman of considerable wealth (the 'precious oil' would have cost a year's wages for a common labourer) and secondly that she was deeply involved with and committed to Jesus and his ministry - a serious devotee of his teaching. Why else would she have risked standing by the cross, and risked going to the tomb where guards had been posted.

Is this the same 'woman of the city who was a sinner' who, in Luke 7, while Jesus was eating in a Pharisee's house did the same with her 'alabaster box of ointment' and to whom Jesus said "Your sins are forgiven"; or the one from whom Jesus cast out "seven evil spirits". It

is important to note here that the 'sins' and 'evil spirits' are nowhere specified and at the time is far more likely to refer to some form of illness. Be that as it may, the very male dominated early church took the sins to be sexual and this led Pope Gregory in 591 to declare Mary was a sexually promiscuous woman or prostitute, perhaps echoing the sacred prostitutes of ancient pagan temples. The misconception stuck - 'Magdalene' became a word to describe an adulterous woman; street girls in the London of 1850 were called 'Madelines' and there were the infamous Magdalene laundries for 'fallen women' in Ireland. Some good has nevertheless come from this error (which Pope Paul VI corrected in 1969) because many Christians have been inspired to care for those trapped in prostitution.

We commonly think of Mary Magdalene as Mary of Magdala - a town later destroyed by the Romans during the Jewish revolt and not mentioned in early church writings, but which modern excavations show was a sophisticated Hellenistic city with a synagogue. Alternatively, in the original Greek of the gospels, she is Mary *the* Magdalene - a title derived from Migdal - a tower. What is uncontroversial is that Mary Magdalene was Jesus companion throughout his ministry in Galilee and helped organise and finance his mission of healing and salvation to the sick and the poor, and followed him to Jerusalem for his passion, death and resurrection. Jesus certainly had a very inclusive attitude to women, unlike much of the culture of the time.

So, why does Mary Magdalene appear nowhere in Acts or in Paul's letters - has she been deliberately written out? Paul makes very little reference to the life of Jesus or his teaching and is interested primarily in his own insights; he also has a reputation for misogyny, writing "it is shameful for women to speak in church". But why nothing in Acts? Acts does mention 'the women and Mary the mother of Jesus' in the upper room at Pentecost, but concentrates almost entirely on Peter and the other male disciples. During the last century various incomplete papyrus Gnostic texts were discovered in Egypt including a Gospel of Mary alongside that of Thomas and Philip. These actually predate the gospels of Luke and John and the writing of Acts. They are very different from the canonical gospels, being either discourses or sets of sayings, but in them Mary Magdalene is clearly one of the disciples. She knows scripture and discusses its meaning with Jesus, including the nature and purpose of discipleship. In the gnostic gospel of Philip she is said to be the 'constant companion of the Lord'. These writings also contain clear indications of male hostility. Mary is attacked by Peter who says "Lord we cannot tolerate this woman anymore; she speaks all the time". Perhaps this is why we hear nothing about Mary Magdalene in Acts. The gnostic sect, Mary, and women as apostles were actively suppressed by the early male church.

Much later tradition has it that Mary and Lazarus travelled to France to proclaim the gospel. If you go to France on holiday you may have noticed that Mary is very prominent in the Abbey at Vezelay; and the cave of Mary Magdalen at Sainte Baume where she is said to have lived as a hermit is one of the oldest Christian shrines in the world.

So much speculation and uncertainty. What can we learn? What is clear is that, in his ministry, Jesus group of followers included both women and men and that Mary Magdalene in particular was especially close to Jesus. We should, therefore, think of Mary Magdalene as a follower of Jesus with great virtues which we should emulate - total support for the ministry or our Lord with all the means at her disposal; constant love for our Lord; compassion with the tortured; solidarity with the dying; and loyalty that extended beyond death. Mary Magdalene is, indeed, a role model for us all.

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Prof John Morris

Compline, March 24th

Lent 3: Jesus appears on the road to Emmaus and is revealed in the breaking of bread.

As you will be aware, to fit in with the focus of the 'making group' on the 'Stations of the Resurrection' in these Lent Complines we are looking at the 'back-story' of the resurrection appearances and, in particular the sense of emptiness and abandonment that must have been felt by all those involved in the period immediately after the crucifixion and until the impact of the resurrection was really grasped. So, what is the 'back-story' of the two people walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus in the late evening of the Sunday when the empty tomb had been discovered? And what does it mean for us, in England in the twentieth century?

The earliest version of Mark ends with no reference to the walk to Emmaus, but has the two Marys and Salome fleeing from the empty tomb and a vision there and - terrified - 'they said nothing to anybody because they were afraid'. But, in what appears to be a later addition, the women do tell Peter and his companions; the passage then continues "later that day, Jesus appeared in a different guise to two of his 'sorrowing followers' as they were walking, on their way to the country. These also went and took the news to the others, but again no-one believed them."

Luke has a similar passage with the apostles not believing the women, and then has a longer version of the two men walking from Jerusalem. Luke names Emmaus as their destination, tells us that it is about seven miles from Jerusalem, that the walk was on the same day as the resurrection and that they have heard that the tomb of Jesus was found empty, then gives a lot more detail of the encounter.

Before we get to that, why does Luke specifically mention the name of the village - Emmaus? Emmaus means 'hot springs' and was significant to Jews at the time because, at the battle of Emmaus, Judas Maccabeus was victorious over the Seleucids and gained independence for Palestine for the first time since the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem in 586BC. This brought peace and ensured the survival of Judaism. Most likely the New Testament Emmaus is the Roman Emmaus Nicopolis, 19 miles from Jerusalem.

Luke names only one of the two walkers (Cleopas - short for Cleopatros - Greek for 'the glory of the father' (we're more familiar with the female form - Cleopatra!). [One early source (AD180) suggests that Cleopas was the brother of Joseph, husband of Mary]. The two were not clearly one of the eleven disciples because, after their encounter with the risen Christ, they promptly walked back to Jerusalem to tell the eleven. This implies that there were many other people (including the women we discussed last Sunday) who were part of 'Jesus movement' - indeed later they refer to the women as "of our company".

Luke's account starts prosaically enough. Any two people who'd been through the events of the passion would have been talking as they walked. Furthermore, no surprise that they are said to have been "in deep gloom". Perhaps also no surprise that another walker joined them, en route from Jerusalem. The stranger who they do not recognise asks them what they are talking about. At this, the two stop - totally surprised, and Cleopas says sadly "Are you the only person staying in Jerusalem who hasn't heard all that has happened recently? Jesus of Nazareth - a powerful prophet of God, acclaimed by the whole people, was handed over by the chief priests and rulers to be sentenced to death and was crucified". So, the end of all their hopes - all crumbled to dust.

But what exactly were they hoping for? Cleopas continues "We were hoping that he was the man to *liberate* Israel". This 'liberation' is not explained. One possibility is that - like the zealots - they were hoping that Jesus would lead some sort of movement that would liberate

Israel from the Romans - simple nationalistic fervour. This was clearly widespread at the time, as the Jewish revolts against the Romans during the next 40 years demonstrate. For pious Jews (and it seems likely that the two walkers were in this category) the 'liberation' might be to allow pious Jews to follow their temple worship without let or hindrance, although it seems that, provided it did not lead to civil unrest, the Romans were willing to let the Jewish priesthood run things their way. It's also possible that, having witnessed Jesus 'cleansing of the temple', they were hoping for a new and purer form of Jewish worship. We shall never know - whatever their hopes and whatever the liberation they hoped for, all was now desolation and gloom. Maybe they didn't even look carefully at the man who joined them - they certainly weren't expecting the resurrection.

After hearing Cleopas recount the recent events, the man who joins them rebukes them for their unbelief and explains the prophecies about the Messiah to them. But, still they have no idea who he is despite the fact that he says 'How dull you are and slow to believe all that the prophets said. That the Messiah was bound to suffer before being glorified'. Could they have thought he was one of the priests, well versed in scripture? Or maybe they were just too sunk in gloom to care one way or another! What did it matter - it was all over anyway! Even Jesus body had disappeared!

On reaching Emmaus and either their house or an inn, the stranger was apparently about to continue on his journey, but, with typical Jewish hospitality, they pressed him "Stay with us, for evening draws on and the day is almost over". Sound advice because, as you will remember from one of Jesus' parables about the man who 'fell among thieves' as he walked from Jerusalem to Jericho and was tended by a Samaritan, the country roads were pretty dangerous at that time. So the stranger went in to stay with them.

Presumably some time later, after food had been prepared or served and the necessary ablutions had taken place such as foot washing after dusty road, the stranger sat down at table with them. Then we read "He took bread and said the blessing" - perhaps still no surprise - that would have happened at every meal, and maybe from their previous conversation on the road they thought the stranger might be some sort of priest. But then in what seems a complete reversal of etiquette he, the guest, offered the broken bread to his hosts, Cleopas and his companion. And it is then, we read that "their eyes were opened, and they recognised him, and he vanished from their sight".

Difficult to imagine the shock of that! But the shock clearly jolted them out of their misery and into their senses because they then recalled how the stranger had explained the scriptures to them, and that this 'set their hearts on fire'. So, without a moment's delay they retrace the long journey back to Jerusalem to tell the eleven assembled together, but arriving there Luke tells us the disciples said "It's true, the Lord has risen, he has appeared to Simon (Peter)". There's some uncertainty here, because Luke's gospel makes no other mention of an appearance to Simon Peter. Be that as it may, Cleopas and his companion then told their own story of their encounter with the risen Jesus.

What are we to learn from this passage, with all its uncertainties? There will be many times in our own lives when we build up very high hopes for this or that event or outcome in the future, and perhaps invest our hopes in some other person or persons, whether as leader or friend. We do this personally and as a nation - witness the current political scene! Because those hopes and expectations are built so high, when they are not realised, and perhaps dashed in the most cruel way, we too can sink to the depths of despair, and not be able to understand or accept what is being explained to us. What the Emmaus appearance tells us is that, however low we may feel, however confused and downhearted we may be about the future, like Cleopas and his friend, we can discover our risen Lord afresh and our own way forward and have 'our hearts set on fire' in the breaking of bread at communion, Sunday by Sunday.

Lent Compline Talks 2019

St Mary's Kidlington

Prof John Morris

Compline, March 31st

Lent 4: Jesus appears to the eleven in Jerusalem

This Sunday we continue to look at the 'back-story' of the resurrection appearances and, in particular the sense of desolation and fear felt by all the followers of Jesus in the days after his arrest and crucifixion and before the impact of the resurrection was really grasped. Last week we looked at the two men who encountered the risen Christ at Emmaus and rushed back to Jerusalem to tell the disciples. The end of Mark continues "Afterwards, when the eleven were at table, Jesus appeared to them and reproached them for their incredulity and dullness because they had not believed those who had seen him after he was raised from the dead". Matthew's gospel makes no mention of an appearance of the risen Christ to the disciples in Jerusalem but Luke and John have a similar passage. John's gospel, says "Later that evening (the day of the resurrection) when the disciples were together behind locked doors, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them".

Who were this group, huddled together a room, behind locked doors, fearing for their very lives? It was Jesus' disciples, but according to John not Thomas - we'll come to doubting Thomas another week - and the group of women including Mary Magdalene. Tonight, I want to consider what we know about those 10 fearful men who had invested so much in following Jesus in his ministry, who had deserted him when he was arrested and crucified, and who were now hiding in a locked room. How many of the ten could you name? What do we know about them? And what can we learn from the little we do know?

Let's start with Peter, or as he was originally in Greek, Simon son of Jonas; a married man and a fisherman who lived in Bethsaida and Capernaum. He may be the author of the two epistles that bear his name. Like most of the other disciples Peter was a Galilean. The contemporary writer Josephus says of Galileans "They were ever fond of innovation and by nature disposed to change and delighted in sedition. They were every ready to follow a leader and to begin an insurrection; quick in temper, given to quarrelling, but very chivalrous; easily aroused by an appeal to adventure, loyal to the end." Jesus clearly did not choose 'easy' companions! Peter was the leader and spokesperson of the twelve during Christ's ministry and became one of the major players in the early church in Jerusalem. Hauled up before Annas, Caiaphas and the Jewish hierarchy (who sneeringly called Peter and John 'untrained laymen') to explain their preaching and especially the sin (in their eyes) of healing of a cripple on the sabbath, they were ordered to refrain from all public speaking and teaching in the name of Jesus. From Josephus' pen-portrait it's no surprise that this had no effect on either man and Peter continued to preach to the Jews. Tradition says he went as far as Babylon and that he was crucified, head down, in Rome.

Andrew was also a Galilean fisherman and it was he who either introduced his brother Peter to Jesus or was called with Peter by Jesus. Andrew may earlier have been a disciple of John the Baptist. We hear little more about him in either the gospels or Acts, but he is said to have preached widely, and is claimed by Greece, Russia, and Scotland as their patron saint. In Greece he healed a governor's wife but was later arrested and crucified on an X-shaped cross, the St Andrew's cross that forms the Saltire - the flag of Scotland.

James the elder and his brother John (the 'disciple whom Jesus loved'), were sons of Zebedee and Salome and also fishermen in Bethsaida. Apparently, they were reasonably well off (Zebedee had hired servants in his fishing business). James and John always

appear together in the New Testament, but little is said about James. He is said to have been the first of the twelve to be martyred. John, his brother, however, has many mentions in the New Testament. He was apparently very ambitious, a man with an explosive temper (hence the name 'Boanerges' - 'son of thunder') and is said to have preached in Asia minor. (One Wikipedia source I found states glibly that he wrote the Gospel of John, the three letters of John and the Revelation, which just shows how careful one must be with on-line sources, because all authoritative texts say this is nonsense!) We'll come back to this John later.

Philip, John's gospel tells us, was the first Bethsaida fishermen to whom Jesus simply said "Follow me". Having met Christ, Philip immediately rushed off to find his brother Nathanael saying "We have found the man spoken of by Moses in the Law", Jesus from Nazareth". When Nathanael protests "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" Philip simply replies "Come and see". If he did join the disciples he is never again mentioned. And whether this Nathanael is the same as the apostle Bartholomew as some claim, seems unlikely. The name Bartholomew means 'son of Talmi'. Ancient references have Bartholomew roaming widely as a missionary ending in Armenia (with Jude 'Thaddeus') or India where he was reputedly martyred by being skinned alive.

Very little is known about James the lesser. He was yet another Galilean and perhaps brother of Jude, or even a brother of Jesus. He may have preached in Palestine and in Egypt where he is said to have been crucified; we really don't know. Jude, or Judas Thaddeus, may have been a zealot. John's gospel tells us that, at the last supper, when Jesus says "He who loves me and obeys my commands, I will love him and disclose myself to him" Judas says "Lord, what can have happened, that you mean to disclose yourself to us and not to the world?" This suggests an interest in worldly power. Christ's answer stressed the way of love rather than that of power. Jude is said to have gone on to preach (perhaps with Simon zelotes), both being killed in Beirut according to an ancient *Acts of Simon & Jude*. Jude is the patron saint of lost causes (and also bizarrely of the Chicago Police Department). We know even less about Simon Zelotes (Simon the Canaanite) except that he was another zealot, and fervent in the struggle for the purity of the Jewish religion.

Finally, we come to Matthew (or Levi - it was common to have two names; Matthew comes from Matt (gift) & Yahweh). Matthew was very different from all the other Galilean fisher-folk we have so far considered. He lived in Capernaum and was a tax-collector. The King James version calls him a 'publican' but that doesn't mean an inn-owner, but a man in public service, handling public money. He was probably the only of the apostles who could write. Devout Jews at that time hated tax gatherers first because they thought God was the only one to whom it was right to pay taxes and second because most tax gatherers were notoriously unjust. Matthew is said to have preached and been martyred in Ethiopia.

What can we learn from these very sketchy and disputed facts about this largely illiterate and hot-tempered group of men who were Jesus' intimate companions throughout his earthly ministry who, after his arrest, deserted him and fled? Not, you would think the ideal ministry team! The first is that Jesus called local men, even one who would probably be despised by the others. Jesus calls us all, whatever our situation. Like the disciples, our response must be to join Him in His mission, perhaps even leaving our established way of life. Second, having been called, our lives may be altered in unpredictable ways and are unlikely to be all plain sailing. Third, like the apostles we may, because of our own preconceptions, fail properly to understand Jesus's message and, whatever our protestations of faith, may desert or even deny our Lord when tested. But, finally and very positively that, having been touched by Christ, and having tried to follow him however imperfectly, like the apostles, we have a Christ-given mission to spread the

good news of the Gospel to those we meet and will be given the strength to do that. We're unlikely to travel widely, preaching, and be martyred for our faith, but we are called to live the gospel in our daily lives and share the good news with those we meet, day by day.

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Prof John Morris

Compline, April 7th

Lent 5: Jesus and St Thomas

Last Compline, when we thought about the ten disciples to whom Jesus first appeared in the locked upper room, we did not consider Thomas (Thomas didymos (the twin)), because he was not present. Tonight, I want us to think about Thomas, in particular because of his nick-name “doubting Thomas”. In looking at all the negative emotions felt by the disciples immediately after the crucifixion, it seems particularly important to think about doubt, which we often consider a negative emotion. I guess that there are few of us who have not, at some time, experienced doubts about our faith. Also, as we saw last week, we have very little incontrovertible evidence about the events that occurred at the passion and resurrection. It is, therefore, perfectly rational to have doubts about exactly who did and said what and when at that time. So, what can we learn from ‘doubting Thomas’ and how he overcame his doubts to become one of the apostles engaged in preaching the gospel? And what does this tell us about how we should deal with our own doubts?

We know nothing about how Thomas became a disciple of Jesus. He is not mentioned in the first call of the fisherman disciples in Matthew, Mark or John, so we have no idea what his occupation was before becoming a disciple. Thomas’s name appears first in Luke when, after a night in prayer, Jesus called his disciples and, from among them, chose twelve he named Apostles. It is here that Thomas appears in the list where his name is linked with that of Matthew, so perhaps they were friends or of a similar background?

The only other references to Thomas are in John’s gospel. The first comes when Jesus was told that his friend Lazarus was near to death. When Jesus announced that he was going back to Bethany the other disciples tried to dissuade him saying “It’s not long since the Jews there were wanting to stone you!” But it was Thomas who said to the other disciples “Let us also go, that we may die with him”. Thomas was realistic - he had taken in the political scene accurately - but clearly Thomas was also nothing if not brave or even foolhardy; no evidence here of doubt as to what should be done! Those brave words were, however, hollow. Thomas was presumably among the disciples who went to sleep in the garden of Gethsemane while Jesus prayed in anguish, and presumably he was also among those who fled when Jesus was arrested.

The next mention of Thomas is in John’s account of the last supper and it is here that his questioning, doubting aspect is first mentioned. When Jesus says “Trust in God. I am going to prepare a place for you so that where I am you may be also; and my way there is known to you”, it is Thomas who wants clarification, saying “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” to which Jesus replies with the phrase we all know so well “I am the way, the truth and the life”. Whether Thomas asks some of the other questions that the disciples put to Jesus that evening is not stated.

The main reason Thomas is called “doubting”, however, is because, when Jesus appeared to the ten apostles and the women on the evening of the resurrection, Thomas was not there. When the disciples tell him that they had seen the Lord, Thomas says “Unless I see the mark of the nails on his hands, unless I put my finger into the place where the nails were, and my hand into his side, I won’t believe it”. Here again was the realist speaking. He may have witnessed other crucifixions; he knew what happened when people were crucified! They did not visit their friends afterwards! So, like us, when told of some apparently unbelievable occurrence, Thomas wanted evidence, evidence not only of

sight but also of touch. And, of course, a week later he was offered that evidence when he was with the disciples in that same locked room. The disciples clearly had not lost their fear at this point and were still in hiding. When Jesus appeared among them, as before, he gave the traditional greeting “Peace be with you”. “Shalom”. Then he said to Thomas “reach your finger here; see my hands. Reach your hand here and put it into my side. Be unbelieving no longer, but believe” to which Thomas exclaims “My Lord and my God”. Next comes the saying of Jesus that is most important for us today, unless we have been granted some sort of vision “Because you have seen me you have found faith. Happy are those who never saw me and yet have found faith”.

Thomas appears just once more in the Bible, in the Acts of the Apostles when, just after the Ascension, the disciples returned to Jerusalem. The eleven, among whom Thomas is named, were again together in an upper room, where “they all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers”. Notice that there is now no hint of their earlier fear - the mission has begun. For Thomas, there is a substantial tradition reflected in an ancient text called the Acts of Thomas that by, AD 52, Thomas had travelled as far as India, where he is regarded by some as Patron Saint; there is an Indian group called the St Thomas Christians, and a St Thomas cathedral basilica in Chennai. There is also a Coptic Gospel of Thomas, written between AD40 and 140, part of the Nag Hammadi library dug up in Egypt in 1945. This is a compilation of sayings of Jesus more than half of which are familiar to us from the gospels. It’s an interesting read!

What can we learn from Thomas? It is surely not that we have to see something with our own eyes to believe it. Although we often say “seeing is believing”, it is clear that we can be mistaken by the apparent evidence of our eyes. From a scientific viewpoint, what we “see” is actually our brain’s best guess concerning the stream of information coming from our eyes. What evidence do we need to acknowledge Jesus as “my Lord and my God”. We certainly won’t see him with our eyes, but throughout our lives we catch glimpses of him and his teaching in many different ways. It may be in church, in sermons and discussions of faith, in private prayer, or in our experience of nature, of the love of others - so many ways in which we can feel the presence of God if we open ourselves to his love and teaching. For some it may be a moment of conversion, but for most, it is our whole life experience.

The disciples in the upper room were initially afraid. I find it interesting that fear involves a rather primitive part of the brain called the amygdala. Love, gratitude, compassion, empathy involve more highly evolved parts. When we are frightened we do not necessarily make good or rational decisions; short-term self-interest always predominates. Jesus second appearance to the disciples in the upper room was not just to convince Thomas, but once more to give them all his peace. To transform them from fearful people hiding away, to people whose core was at peace, confident in his love and ready to go out to preach his gospel of love to the ends of the earth, whatever the personal cost.

So is doubt helpful? Can it be good? We get so many false messages we need to be alert for ‘Fake News’ and continue to seek after the truth. Doubt is a sign of an alert mind. Doubt asks the right questions. We misunderstand the nature of faith if we think that it casts out doubt. That the more faith we have the fewer questions we’ll ask. If it does, it becomes ‘blind’ or ‘unthinking faith’. We see today far too many examples of unthinking adherence to some or other dogma. Faith and doubt are woven together much closer than we might imagine. Faith is not knowledge, but “the assurance of things hoped for”. Questioning is not the antithesis of faith, but the way faith grows.

When Jesus said “blessed are those who never saw me and yet have faith” he was not rebuking Thomas but blessing us. I suggest that we should think of Thomas, not as an unbelieving doubter, but as a model of how to become a faithful disciple. Thomas was not a credulous fool, but one who was realistic and assessed the cost. Once he had encountered the risen Jesus, his faith was as realistic as his earlier doubt. We must pray that the same will be true for us as we encounter Jesus in our daily lives.

Lent Compline Talks 2019

St Mary's Kidlington

Prof John Morris

Compline, April 14th

Palm Sunday: The women at the Passion and Resurrection

On the last three Sundays we considered Mary Magdalen and the male disciples to whom the resurrected Jesus appeared twice in Jerusalem. On each occasion the gospels tell us there were a number of other women present. This evening I want to look more carefully at those other women. In the male-dominated culture of the time they get scant mention, but apparently accompanied Jesus throughout his ministry. Compared to other contemporary sources, the gospels contain many more references to women. But it is Jesus' words and actions that are most strikingly inclusive and contrary to the cultural norms of the time.

From our 20th century perspective we often forget how very male-dominated Jewish society then was. The daily prayers of Jewish men included this thanksgiving "Praised be God that he has not created me a woman". A woman's place was to create a hospitable home and bear children. Philo, contemporary with Jesus, taught that women should not leave home except to go to the synagogue. Generally married young women were almost entirely under the protection of a male: father, husband or male relative. Women were very vulnerable, with little access to property or inheritance except through a male relative; any money she earned belonged to her husband. A man could divorce his wife simply by handing her a writ of divorce; a woman could not divorce her husband. Adultery by a woman (but not a man) was punishable by stoning. Men were not to speak to a woman in public.

Given this context (which is, sadly, still extant in some sects such as the recent 'caliphate') we begin to realise just how radical was Jesus' approach. He spoke to women in public such as the widow at Nain who he approached at a funeral and raised her dead and only son. Jesus touched women in public to heal them, such as the woman crippled for 18 years who he met in the Temple. The women to whom he spoke recognised this behaviour as extraordinary - think of the Samaritan woman who says "How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?" two cultural bans defied! John records that the disciples "were astonished to find him talking to a woman". Jesus was also not worried about ritual uncleanness. At that time anyone who was bleeding or ill was considered unclean and able to transfer that uncleanness by touch. When a woman touched his cloak to be healed the fact that Jesus allowed the touch was seized upon by a Pharisee "If this man were a prophet he would have known that the woman touching him is a sinner". When Jesus encountered a crowd about to stone a woman 'taken in adultery' he said "Let him who is without sin among you cast the first stone".

In religious practice, women were restricted to the outer court of the Jerusalem Temple. In synagogues they were separated from the men and not permitted to read aloud. Whereas men were *required* to say certain prayers daily, women were not. Similarly, although the study of scripture was regarded as important for men, women were *not allowed* to study sacred texts. The first century Rabbi Eliezer is quoted as saying "Rather should the word of the Torah be burned than entrusted to a woman". Women were not allowed to bear witness in a religious court. Jesus broke all those rules by having a group of women as part of his travelling group. Unlike the rabbis of his day he taught women about scripture; making no distinction by gender. Matthew tells us that when someone said to Jesus that his family were wanting to talk to him he responded "Who is my mother, who are my brothers? And pointing to his followers "These are my mother and my brothers". It was the women disciples who stood at the foot of the cross

and who were first to witness the resurrection and told to carry the news to the apostles, although when they do, the men's reaction was that "their story was nonsense". Although these women become almost invisible in the later parts of the Acts of the Apostles, a careful reading shows that women played an important role in the early church - as they increasingly do today. There was Tabitha (Dorcas) in Joppa who ministered primarily to widows; Mary, the mother of John Mark, a widow who ran what we would regard as an early house church; and Lydia, a prominent wealthy woman who appears to have been a CEO in the dye industry who, with Priscilla, who ran a tent-making business in Corinth, became part of Paul's missionary team.

Some of the female followers during Jesus ministry surely rank as disciples. In addition to Mary Magdalene, Lazarus' sisters Mary and Martha were very close companions and, although Martha took the traditional Jewish role, Mary "sat at the feet of Jesus listening to Him"; she was, in a very real sense, a disciple. It was women who stood at the foot of the cross. Mark says "A number of women were also present ... among them Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome; Matthew adds "the mother of the sons of Zebedee"; Luke "the women who had accompanied him from Galilee"; John names Mary Magdalene, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary, Jesus' mother.

It is Mary, Jesus' mother, who I want to focus on now. Mary is also venerated in Islam as 'our lady' (there is a mosque in Abu Dhabi named "Mary Mother of Jesus"). Mary appears first in the nativity narratives when - betrothed to Joseph - she becomes pregnant and gives birth to Jesus. Betrothal then was organised by a girl's father and Mary was probably about 13. Think about all the images of Mary that you know, whether painting or sculpture - almost without exception Mary is sitting with her son on her knee. Hence the 'obedient Mary, meek and mild' around which have grown ideas of immaculate conception, Mary's perpetual virginity (despite gospel references to Jesus' brothers!), and her bodily assumption into heaven. I suggest that Mary has been grossly sentimentalised and misrepresented (largely by male writers); that she was actually a very tough, determined lady.

First, she had to cope with a pregnancy during betrothal - one can imagine the neighbours' reaction in the small village community! Small wonder that Joseph was "minded to put her away privily". Next, when the family were returning home after their ritual Passover visit to Jerusalem and they finally locate Jesus three days later in the temple, it was Mary (not Joseph), who reproached Jesus; despite his reply that he "must be about his father's business"; nevertheless, Jesus went home with her. Early in Mark we read that, when a large crowd were mobbing Jesus, Mary and his brothers set out "to take charge of him" because people were saying that he was mad. Mary next appears at the wedding at Cana when the wine ran out; here again she takes an active role to get things sorted. She is not named again during Jesus' ministry until she stands at the foot of the cross. We cannot begin to imagine what courage it took just to be there, nor what went through Mary's mind as she watched her son being crucified and dying. Then, and after the crucifixion, Mary was clearly part of a group of very brave women who defied custom. Whether she was in the locked upper room when the risen Jesus appeared to the disciples is not recorded. A suggestion that she was comes in Acts, because Mary is named as one of the group of women with the apostles and Jesus' brothers who, after the ascension, were at prayer and engaged in choosing a successor to Judas Iscariot. She may also have been part of the group at Pentecost, because Acts says "they were all together in one place". Mary is said to be buried at Ephesus where she was taken by 'the beloved disciple' to whom she was bequeathed by her crucified son. So, I suggest that we revise the "Mary meek and mild" saccharine image and think about Mary, mother of Jesus, more as a very determined lady who effectively became one of her son's disciples. We can only pray that we, who know Jesus only by faith, may also follow him in discipleship throughout our lives.

Lent Compline Talks 2019
St Mary's Kidlington

Prof John Morris

April 15th Monday of Holy Week: Jesus at the sea of Galilee

One thing that strikes anyone who reads through all four gospel accounts of the appearances of the resurrected Jesus is how little they agree with one another in terms of what happened when and where. Indeed, if they were four witnesses in a court of law, their testimony would be ripped to shreds by an opposing counsel on grounds of inconsistency. However, that very inconsistency argues strongly against any suggestion that there was some sort of collusion among Jesus' followers or the gospel writers to give credibility to a mission they had determined on. What really matters, as the great Jesus scholar Geza Vermes argues, is not the detail, but the overriding evidence that, within a short time after the crucifixion, the terrified small group of the followers of Jesus, still hiding from the public gaze, all at once underwent an experience - the conviction that they had witnessed a living Jesus - and that experience was so strong that it transformed them into fearless spiritual warriors, healing in the name of Jesus and openly proclaiming the gospel they had received from Him to the Jewish authorities, to Romans, to all they met.

This evening I'd like to concentrate on the resurrection appearances in Galilee and what we can learn from them. Galilee was, of course, the disciples familiar home ground. It was on the sea of Galilee (sometimes called Lake Tiberias or Lake of Gennesaret) that many of the disciples had been fishermen and it was where Jesus had quelled the storm that threatened their boat and their lives.

What do the gospels tell us? In both Mark and Luke, we read that, at the empty tomb, the angel tells the women that Jesus is going before them to Galilee and that they must tell the disciples to leave for Galilee where they will see Jesus again. Then, a little later, and only in Matthew, 'the eleven disciples made their way to Galilee ... when they saw him they fell prostrate before him, though some were doubtful'. Luke has no mention of an encounter in Galilee, but John has the quite detailed story of what happened when the disciples had returned to Galilee as instructed. There Peter, returning to the only thing he knew, says "I'm going fishing" to which Thomas, the two sons of Zebedee (James the greater and John), two other unnamed disciples, and Nathanael of Cana-in-Galilee say they will join him, all apparently in one boat.

Nathanael, you may remember, appeared right at the start of John's gospel when Jesus met Philip and said to him 'Follow me' whereupon Philip went to find his friend Nathanael and said to him "We have found the man spoken of by Moses and the Prophets - Jesus from Nazareth", to which Nathanael retorts "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?". Jesus, however, on seeing Nathanael said "Here is an Israelite in whom nothing is false", to which Nathanael asks "How do you know me?". Jesus then explains using a figure of speech that apparently refers to studying the Torah, at which Nathanael exclaims "You are the Son of God, the King of Israel". Nathanael was his given name. Scholars think he can be identified with the apostle Bartholomew (from the family name, Bar Tolmai) in part because, so often, he is linked with Philip.

Be that as it may, they'd gone out night fishing - fishing was traditionally done at night with lamps. There was no refrigeration at that time so that, if the fish were to be fresh for the market that day they had to be landed early in the morning. That night they caught nothing and, as they neared shore, someone standing on the beach called out "Friends, have you caught anything?" When they answered "No" the figure on the beach (who they did not recognise) said "Shoot out the net to starboard and you will make a

catch". They did so, and made a huge catch which nearly broke their nets. Then, the disciple identified in John's gospel only as "the disciple whom Jesus loved", recognises the figure on the shore and exclaims to Peter "It is the Lord" and it is Simon Peter, impetuous as ever, who jumps overboard and swims to the shore, the rest hauling in the boat and their catch. On the shore is a fire, and Jesus invites them to bring some of the fish and have breakfast - but, apparently, they still do not dare ask him "Who are you?" even though, it's said, "They knew it was the Lord".

You'll have noticed that it was "the disciple who Jesus loved" who first recognises the stranger on the shore. Who is this disciple that only John's gospel refers to in this enigmatic way? Although a few sources think it is Lazarus, the vast majority think it is John himself because at the very end of John's gospel comes the statement "It is this same disciple who attests to what is here written; it is in fact he who wrote it". This was the disciple who asked Jesus, at the last supper, "who will betray you?" This was the disciple who stood at the foot of the cross and to whom the dying Jesus entrusted his mother, and this was the disciple also about who, after the fish breakfast on the Galilee lake shore, when Peter asks Jesus "Lord, what will happen to him?" gets the rather curt reply "What is it to you? Follow me".

I'd like to highlight four things I think we can learn from this series of episodes in Galilee, all of which effectively give us the same message. First, from the very short passage in Luke, that having gone to Galilee and encountering the risen Jesus, the disciples prostrated themselves 'though some were doubtful'. Doubt and uncertainty are a part of mental awareness and, as we saw with 'doubting Thomas', doubting, provided it leads to productive questioning, can be a positive, not a negative emotion, and can deepen our faith. As far as one can judge, all the eleven apostles went on to demonstrate by their lives that they had lost any doubts of the reality of the resurrected Jesus in their lives, and that they were prepared, quite literally, to 'put their lives on the line' - few of them died peacefully their beds!

Second that, when we believe we have caught even a glimpse of our Lord, like Simon Peter in the boat, we should be urgent to follow it up and press on to gain our own closer, deeper experience of our Lord, because it is only if we get close to Jesus that we can hear his voice clearly. Tomorrow night we'll spend even more time considering Peter.

Third, we must listen to our Lord. Even when we are depressed and nothing seems to be going right, like those fishermen who believed they had just lost their Lord in the most horrific manner and, with him, all their hopes, and now had tried to fish all night to no avail; still we must listen. Jesus won't be standing on a shore, or on the other side of a road, shouting across at us "Do this, or do that" so how can we listen? I suggest by study in depth of the gospel message. Why do I stress the words "in depth"? We are so very familiar with many passages in the gospels that there can be a danger that they just 'float by' with our brain thinking 'Yes, I know that'. A few Sundays ago I was horrified to discover that, when that morning's gospel came up in our conversation, neither I nor Joyce could really remember what had been read! For this reason I find reading or discussing the thoughts of those who have made bible study a life-time's work a real help. And prayer - it may be both asking prayer "Lord, I'm in a real mess - what should I do now?" Or, equally important, it may be listening prayer - waiting in silence for that "still small voice". I suggest that the talking and listening must both be practised. If I might use the analogy of learning a foreign language, it is only by prolonged practice that any of us will be able to understand what someone who speaks that language is saying to us and be able to converse with them.

And, last but not least, there is Jesus' instruction not just to Peter but to us all: "Follow me".

Lent Compline Talks 2019
St Mary's Kidlington
Prof John Morris

Tuesday of Holy Week: Jesus and Peter - forgiveness and instructions

Throughout the gospel accounts of the passion, the resurrection appearances, Pentecost and the early history of the church in Acts, Simon Peter is the most prominent of all the disciples. There are also two very substantial letters both of which start "From Peter, apostle of Jesus Christ" and are addressed to the scattered groups of believers which were springing up around the near east. Several other apocryphal books bear his name (there is an Acts of Peter, a Gospel of Peter, a Preaching of Peter, an Apocalypse of Peter and a Judgement of Peter) but in all of these the authorship is uncertain. There is also a very strong tradition that most of the Gospel of Mark was the result of John Mark's association with Peter, listening to his preaching and hearing his eyewitness memories of our Lord.

In short, there is a huge literature on Peter - you only have to go to his enormous Wikipedia entry to realise that. So, who was this very human Bethsaida fisherman who was the constant companion of Jesus throughout his ministry, encountered the resurrected Jesus on a number of occasions, and went on to be the leader of what was to become a world-wide church; first in Antioch, and then in Rome where he was apparently crucified upside down during the reign of the emperor Nero? And what can we learn from some of the key events of his life, particularly those before and in relation to the resurrection?

He started life as Simon son of Jonah in the village of Bethsaida in Galilee and, when we first hear of him, is one of the many fishermen on the lake. Mark tells us that, after John the Baptist had been arrested, Jesus started preaching in Galilee and was walking on the shore when he saw Simon and his brother Andrew at work with their casting net. Jesus simply goes up to them and says "Come with me, and I will make you fishers of men" and you will remember that Mark goes on "And at once they left their nets and followed Jesus". This may be the first indication we have of Simon as a very impetuous man, not given to a careful consideration of the consequences. On the other hand, Mark makes it clear that Simon Peter's call comes *after* Jesus had started his preaching ministry, which in many ways paralleled the earlier preaching of John "Repent, and prepare for the coming of the Kingdom", because both of them had attracted large crowds. So, it might equally be that Peter had heard about or even witnessed both John and Jesus and was at a point in his life when, for whatever reason, he was eager for spiritual growth.

Simon Peter was married - we know that because all three synoptic gospels record Jesus' healing of Simon's mother-in-law in Capernaum - but we hear no more of his wife or any family. He was clearly quite prosperous, because he owned the boat from which Jesus used to preach to the crowds who flocked to him at the lake-side.

If you trace Peter through the gospels, it is a real roller-coaster ride. Repeatedly up, then down. After his call to be a disciple, he next appears in Matthew 14 when, after the feeding of the 5000, Jesus tells the disciples to go by boat to the other side of the lake while he prays. During the night a storm blows up and then we get the strange tale of Jesus walking on the water to join them. The disciples think it is a ghost, but Peter is more practical and says "If it is you Lord, tell me to come to you over the water". On being told to come he starts out but, soon overcome by fear, sinks, only to be rescued by Jesus and upbraided for his lack of faith. Similarly, the disciples are told that their faith is too small after they fail to heal an epileptic. Despite this, when Jesus later asks the disciples who "the Son of Man" is, after some equivocation, it is Simon who blurts out "You are the Messiah" and is then renamed Peter the Rock on whom the church will be built. But, no sooner up than down, when Jesus explained that he will have to suffer much in Jerusalem, Peter took him by the arm and began to rebuke him "Heaven forbid; this shall never happen to you" only to be told "Get behind me Satan; you have only human concerns"

Unusually, all four gospels concur that, after the last supper, when Jesus tells the disciples that they will all lose faith and be scattered, it is Peter who says ‘Though everyone else may fall away, I will not’ only to be told that he will disown Jesus three times. But Peter still sees himself as the big strong man and blusters on “Even if I must die with you I won’t disown you”. But, as we know, less than 24 hours later, after Jesus had been arrested, Peter did exactly that when challenged three times that he was a follower of Jesus. It’s only when the cock crows he remembers his earlier bluster “And he went out, and wept bitterly” (this phrase always brings to my mind the haunting way it is set to music by Bach in the Matthew Passion). Again, Peter crashes from the heights of hubris to the depths of despair.

There is no mention of Peter at the crucifixion but, in John’s gospel only, early on the day of resurrection, having heard from Mary that the stone had been rolled away from the tomb, he is again spurred to action, runs to the tomb and, unlike the other disciple, immediately goes in, sees the empty grave clothes, and “believes”. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians (which we must remember was written before any of the gospels) says that Jesus appeared first to Peter. He certainly would have been in the locked upper room with the other disciples and women when Jesus appeared there. After this, he and the other disciples return to Galilee as instructed by the angel in the empty tomb. Last night we looked at Peter’s impetuous behaviour - jumping out of the boat when the beloved disciple recognised the man on the shore as Jesus. And it is on the shore, after they had eaten, that Jesus reminds Peter of his three-fold denial by asking him three times if he loves him more than anything else, to which Peter can only reply “Lord - you know everything” and is told “Feed my sheep”. When Peter then queries what will happen to the beloved disciple John, again he gets rebuked and told “Follow me”.

What lessons does this brief survey of Simon Peter have for us today? First, that, when called by Jesus to follow him, we may be asked to give up familiar things and embark on a journey the ending of which we cannot even begin to glimpse. In the same way that Simon received a new name from Jesus, we too are given a new identity as his follower. If Peter’s experience is any guide, we should not expect our journey to be all plain sailing - there will be many ups and downs. Like Peter, we should not be timid in our following, but even impetuous or perhaps ‘urgent’ is a better word? Like Peter and the other disciples, our faith may well be proved to be too weak for the task in hand. However, like Peter sinking into the waves, Jesus’ hand is there to help us back into the boat.

I guess none of us here have a problem in acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah, but living out that acknowledgement will create difficulties for us as well as bringing joy and a deep, inward peace. At some point, perhaps when we least expect it, our belief in our Lord may be vigorously questioned by someone in public and, unprepared for it like Peter in the courtyard of the high priest’s house, we may either actively or passively deny our faith. If we do, then bitter tears of self-reproach are the only real response. But, as with Peter on the lakeshore after the fish breakfast, we will find that our Lord still has trust in us to ‘feed his sheep’.

And that is the crucial message I take from this brief study of Peter. ‘Feeding his sheep’ is the very practical task that Jesus entrusts to all of us who acknowledge and follow him as Lord. The very personal task we are given throughout our lives is to care for those around us, in both the physical and spiritual sphere, so that the love of Christ may continue to be felt in our 20th century world.

Lent Compline Talks 2019
St Mary's Kidlington
Prof John Morris

Wednesday of Holy Week: Jesus and disciples at ascension

Throughout this series of brief talks, we've been looking at what is now called the 'back story' of the events and people involved in the resurrection appearances of our Lord. In the last talk it therefore seems appropriate to look at the final appearance of the resurrected Jesus at the ascension and see what we can learn from that. So first, let's look at the New Testament evidence.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus' appearance at the ascension is the only one mentioned apart from the appearance when, on the Sunday morning after the crucifixion, the two Marys are rushing away from the empty tomb to give the disciples the angel's message, and find Jesus standing in their path. He tells them not to be afraid but to tell the disciples to go to Galilee. When the disciples do that, they encounter Jesus 'on the mountain'. And it is there that Jesus gives them their commission to make all nations disciples, to baptize them, and teach them to observe all that he had taught. Furthermore, he gives them the assurance that he will be with them, to the end of time. There is no mention of any ascension. In John, as we discussed last evening, there is the breakfast of fish on the shore of Galilee, but no final commissioning speech or ascension.

The addendum at the end of Mark has essentially the same message as Matthew, but no mention of Galilee. Rather, Mark says that Jesus appeared when the eleven were eating at table and gave them the commission to proclaim the good news to the whole creation. Jesus adds that his believers will be able to heal the sick and speak in strange tongues (a hint of Pentecost) and that, after speaking with them, Jesus 'was taken up into heaven'.

Luke has essentially the same message, but in his gospel it is delivered some time after the fish breakfast in Galilee. Jesus is said to 'open the minds of the disciples so that they can understand the scriptures' and he tells them that, in his name they, who are his witnesses, must proclaim that "repentance bringing the forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem". And then there is another hint of a Pentecost addition, when Jesus instructs the disciples to "remain in Jerusalem" till he sends them the "Father's promised gift" - the Holy Spirit. Luke goes on to say that Jesus then led the disciples out from Jerusalem as far as Bethany, which sits atop the mount of Olives (the "mountain" in Matthew's account?), where he blessed them with uplifted hands and, in the act of blessing, parted from them. Again, no specific mention of ascension. However, Acts, which is also thought to be written by Luke, and places the ascension 40 days after the resurrection, starts "I wrote of all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen, he was taken up to heaven". A little later in Acts the disciples are told to "bear witness for me in Jerusalem, and all over Judea and Samaria, and away to the ends of the earth" then "as they watched, he was lifted up, and a cloud received him from their sight". This, of course, is the image beloved by many religious artists, including one painting in which just a pair of feet emerge from the lowest level of a cloud.

It is also in Acts, that we find one more statement that has had a profound effect on some Christian thinking ever since. Chapter 1 verse 10 says "As he (Jesus) was going, and as they were gazing intently into the sky, all at once there stood beside them two men in white who said "Men of Galilee, why stand there looking up into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken away from you up to heaven, will come again in the same way as you have seen him go." "The link between the sky and heaven is of course a very ancient one; for example, it can be seen in the pyramids and other funerary rites of ancient Egypt which predate Christ by several thousand years.

The theologian James Dunn has called the ascension story “at best a puzzle and at worst an embarrassment” for our age which no longer conceives a physical heaven located above the earth, particularly since we have sent astronauts to the moon who have looked back on and photographed our earth, and astronomers who have used telescopes to peer back millions of light years almost to the origin of the universe. This was not the case when the gospels were written. That and earlier ages believed in a three-tier cosmos, with the heavens above, the ‘underworld’ below, and a flat earth centred on Jerusalem sandwiched in the middle. The visible sky, or firmament separated heaven from the earth. With this concept, humans standing on the earth and looking up would just see just the floor of heaven which, being blue, was considered to be made of lapis-lazuli.

Nor was an ‘ascension to heaven’ an unfamiliar concept for people at that time. In Judaism, steeped in the old testament, it was seen as a sign of divine approval. We have only to think of Elijah ascending to heaven in a fiery chariot, watched by Elisha. The concept would also have been familiar to Roman readers; the ascent of the divine emperor Augustus was said to have been witnessed by senators, and Romulus - Rome’s founder - like Jesus was said to have been taken to heaven in a cloud. In centuries to come some of our present-day concepts may seem just as quaint.

No, it is not the physical aspect of ascension that we need to consider, but the idea that having lived, been crucified, and resurrected in a way we also cannot explain physically, Jesus being ‘taken into heaven’ marks the recommencement of his heavenly rule, seated at the right hand of the Father. Again, I have to fall back on familiar words to express inexpressible concepts. We don’t have any words that can describe the life after death which we can now only glimpse ‘through a glass darkly’ (as Paul put it in his letter to the Corinthian Christians). And so we use words we do understand and which enable us to develop a concept - however partial and imperfect - of something we believe to have ultimate reality. An analogy might be our description of an atom of iron. We think of iron as something solid, because that is the limit of ordinary human experience, but physicists tell us that an atom of iron is largely space, with its nucleus made up of a number of charged particles, surrounded by a rotating swarm of charged electrons. And that view, we are assured, explains how iron can be magnetic and conduct electricity.

So, let’s forget attempts at physical explanations, and look at the real core of the ascension accounts - their underlying message. Unlike futile attempt to explain a physical ascension, the final earthly words of Jesus are perfectly clear and should leave us with no doubt of what he expects of us.

We must “make all nations disciples, teaching them”. That sounds a very big order, but I suggest it means that we have a clear duty to talk about - literally “bear witness to our Lord” - and be prepared to explain our faith to those with whom we come into contact (in this part of the world we don’t need to travel abroad to meet people from many nations). This command is what has energised missionaries from Peter and Paul to the present day. We must also “proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins”. Most of us don’t feel we are called to stand in the centre of town holding a placard saying “Repent for the end is nigh!”, but we *are* expected to examine ourselves, our motives and our actions and, where we find we have fallen short, admit it to ourselves and our Lord, with his assurance of forgiveness. Likewise, when we feel that others have offended us, to practice that same forgiveness.

Like Simon Peter, we may well fail on many occasions, but our Lord does expect us to keep on trying to succeed. And we can draw strength from the assurance that our resurrected, ascended Lord will be with us, even to the end of time.