

Introduction

'The Scaffolding of the Spirit' has been our Lent theme this year, for obvious reasons. This Three Hours service on Good Friday is at the heart of the Christian year, part of the scaffolding with which we make our lives in response to God. The three hours reflect the accounts in the Synoptic Gospels of the crucifixion, in which we are told there was darkness over the whole land from noon until three in the afternoon. But today we are reading John's Passion's and of the glory of the cross on which Christ was raised up.

Stay for the whole three hours or just for a part. The service has 6 sections as well as this introduction and we will end outside on the portico, in what is usually an act of witness in space between church and world, but this year is more enclosed and a place of preparation.

Each section of the service has an identical shape and lasts just under half an hour: a reading from chapters 18 and 19 of John's Gospel followed by a section of Bach's St John's Passion, an address, silence, prayer and hymn.

The service will end at 3pm. If you don't want to stay for the whole service, please leave during one of the hymns, which is also when others will be able to join us. No refreshments can be provided this year. At the finish, we will quietly depart, scattering like the first disciples.

There will be no collection so please put your gift in a basket held by a steward or one of the boxes at the back of the church.

Let us pray,

1. Whom are you looking for?

Reading John 18.1-11

Bach St John Passion 1 Lord, Thou our Master...for ever glorified.

Written in 1724, just as this building was moving towards its completion, the brooding, tense, multi-layered turbulence of that opening of Bach's St John's Passion sets the mood perfectly for our three hours here at the cross of Christ. Whom are you looking for and what is his significance?

Richard Burridge, the Dean of King's College just along the Strand, says that the Gospels of Jesus are more like classical biographies than we used to think. He says an account of the way a person died reveals what they lived for. Each Gospel gives a distinctive account of how they see Jesus. The different pictures are complimentary, different aspects of a complex person.

We are so used to reading all four Gospels as if they were one, that we miss just how distinctive is John's account of Jesus. There is no agony in the Garden of Gethsemane in John, no sleeping disciples contrasted with a praying Christ asking if it is possible for this cup to pass from him. He simply says, "Am I not to drink the cup that the father has given me?" The unfolding of the story provides its own answer in which Jesus takes his part freely, willingly.

John's Gospel gives us the grand picture. The creative Word of God which was in the beginning, is identified with the particular being of Jesus of Nazareth. Love is made known in the humble service of a master washing his disciples' feet, in the feeding of the hungry with the bread of life, and healing the sick. God is known in the light of the world, water of life, bread of heaven, true vine...each of which, in Christ, is eternal.

John's contrast with those who came to arrest Jesus could not be more striking. They came by night, with lanterns, torches and weapons. They had to ask for him twice, and even though he came forward they fell to the ground. Peter also tried to evade the moment by the use of force. It's as if Jesus is so self-possessed that he had to help them fulfil their part in this drama, and when they took him away they even bound him!

In John, Jesus knows his destiny, and accepts it willingly because he is in the Father and the Father is in him. The fact that they are one has the potential to change everything for the world. In the verses at the end of chapter 17, just before we began to read, Jesus said:

Righteous Father, the world does not know you but I know you; and these [disciples] know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.(John 17.25-26)

We often think of the glory of Christ as coming from the resurrection and ascension, but in John's Gospel the glory of God is seen here and now in Jesus's acceptance of the cross. In chapter 17 again, verse 1, "Father the hour has come, glorify your Son, so that the Son may glorify you".

In this pulpit 2 years ago, Desmond Tutu's used a Johannine insight memorably when he said that, "Christ when he was raised on the cross did not say 'I draw *some* people to myself. He said I draw all, All, ALL." The passion of Jesus is a moment of cosmic significance – God so loved *the world*, not just people like us, or the Church, - and *all* who have been given into Christ's hands will be safe.

That's a far cry from the way in the modern church Christians of different flavours often see their view of Christ as exclusive and in competition. William Blake, one of London's visionaries, derided this long ago in 'The Everlasting Gospel':

THE VISION OF CHRIST that thou dost see
Is my vision's greatest enemy.
Thine has a great hook nose like thine;
Mine has a snub nose like to mine.
Thine is the Friend of all Mankind;
Mine speaks in parables to the blind.
Thine loves the same world that mine hates;
Thy heaven doors are my hell gates....

And Caiaphas was in his own mind
A benefactor to mankind.
Both read the Bible day and night,
But thou read'st black where I read white....

I am sure this Jesus will not do,
for Englishman or Jew.

"Whom are you looking for?" Here is God among us; Jesus abiding in God and abiding with us, one with us. The glory of the passion of Jesus is of God sharing what it is to be human and transforming it so that humanity becomes divine. There's glory for you.

"Whom do you seek?"; "Jesus of Nazareth", and in a phrase intentionally laden with the presence of God, Jesus replied, "I am".

2. Are you one of this man's disciples?

Reading John 18.12 – 27

Bach **Aria (Soprano)** 9 I follow thee also with joy to be near Thee

The text Bach set to music as the St John Passion was the gospel narrative combined with poetic texts from a variety of sources. When it came to Peter's denial, Bach seems to have felt the need to increase the drama by importing the detail from Matthew and Luke that after the cock crowed, Peter went out and wept bitterly, as each of us who have tried to follow Jesus will at some time have done.

In a stroke of genius, Bach preceded Peter's denial with that sublime aria, "I follow thee also with joy to be near Thee". It is one of the most beautiful pieces of music in the world. It is also what I long for and aspire to spiritually: following Jesus with joy.

Each of us is complex, and though we strive for personal integration and unity, most of us have known times when we just don't 'add up'. As part of our exploration of 'the scaffolding of the spirit' this Lent, five members of the St Martin's community spoke on Sunday evenings in response to the question, 'Why am I still a Christian?' (If you missed them, the Lent sermons and talks have been printed and are available at the back of the church for a donation of £2.) For some of our speakers there had been times of considerable struggle with life and faith. There's a pattern that the treasure was found when the going was tough. Smoothness produces smooth people, but a bit of grit can produce a pearl.

As we read the scriptures we find ourselves identifying with different characters: Peter and the other disciples, the High Priest, the soldiers, the servant girl...Mary and the other women.... In the reading of the Passion that takes place in churches on Palm Sunday, there used to be a tradition that the priest took the role not of Jesus, as my colleague Richard Carter did last Sunday, but of Judas. It was said this was so that the burden of voicing betrayal did not fall on any layperson, but as I have got older I have wondered if it is also that every priest knows the extremes of both the joy of Christ being with us *and* the burden of our own betrayals.

My predecessor but one, Austen Williams, wrote a prayer which begins,

"I am two men;
and one is longing to serve thee utterly, and one is afraid.
O Lord have compassion upon me."

When I have used that prayer in public worship, I am always asked for copies. In truth, we all know and recognise ourselves.

What happens to Judas doesn't seem to be of much interest to John. Judas did what he had to do and we hear no more of him after the betrayal and arrest of Jesus. This is at one with Jesus being in control and doing the Father's will; Judas played his part. But for those of us who also know about betrayal, and that's not only Jeffrey Archer, the problem of Judas is fascinating.

Judas must have thought there was no way back into fellowship with Christ. What he did was so terrible that it cut him off for ever, whereas Peter allowed Jesus to get the relationship going again. In John chapter 21, that curious restorative 'add on' after the formal end of the Gospel, the risen Lord appeared to the disciples who had gone back to the Sea of Galilee. In asking Simon

Peter three times, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” and Peter affirming, “Yes Lord, you know I love you”, “Feed my seep”, it’s as though Peter is being restored by cancelling out his denial. Jesus then points to Peter’s own death in Rome for having followed Christ faithfully.

Talking about the many people who come to the monastery on retreat, the Abbot of Worth said that people sometimes come in order to discern what is right for them; but of course the other aspect is that having discerned, they most *obey* what it is they have discerned. That is a lot more difficult, as every preacher knows.

Sometimes at Communion we use an invitation from the Iona community:

Come to this table

You who have much faith and you who would lie to have more;

You who have been to this sacrament often and you who have not been for a long time;

You who have tried to follow Jesus and you who have failed.

Come it is Christ who invites us to meet him here.

And you? “Are you not also one of this man’s disciples?”

3. So, you are a King

Reading John 18. 28 - 40

Bach 23 a – g

Evangelist But the Jews cried out and shouted to Pilate...
Chorus If thou let this man go, thou art no friend of Caesar's....
Evangelist Then when Pilate heard them speaking thus...
Chorus Away with him, away with him
Evangelist Pilate saith unto them...
Chorus We have no King but Caesar
Evangelist And then he delivered Him to them that they might crucify him

'Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?' was a trick question intended to catch Jesus out. He took a coin and asked them whose image was on it. "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's but to God the things that are God's." That enigmatic answer gave rise to 2,000 years of debate about whether and how the followers of Christ should be involved in politics. In the second century, Tertullian suggested a different, and for Jews, more obvious understanding. "And you, whose image is on you? Render to God the things that are God's." Hear it that way and it's harder to split the personal from the political, the things of Caesar's from the things of God's.

Religious leaders don't come out well in any of the Gospels but neither here before Pilate does the religious group. They kept themselves outside Pilate's headquarters so as to remain pure for the Passover, whilst shouting for the death of an innocent man. Our capacity for self-deception can be pretty big but groups behave differently to individuals and can take on a sort of animus that no individual would own.

One of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century was the American Reinhold Niebuhr. His book Moral Man, Immoral Society said that individuals could be moral in a way that groups never can. Groups are about politics and power, and people in public life need to understand that difference. We'll do and say things in groups we just wouldn't do individually. How else could a group of probably pretty ordinary individuals shout for the release of Barabbas the bandit over an innocent man?

It is difficult for the individual to stand over against the group. Most of us don't like the sense of isolation and you have to be pretty confident in your own judgement to say that the group has got it wrong. Then something snaps and in conscience you can't do other.

There's an odd culture in the Church at the moment. We are obsessed about homosexuality. Before the last meeting of Anglican Archbishops in February, the Archbishop of Cape Town said that in Africa God might be more concerned with poverty, war, famine and AIDS than homosexuality. Here in the West End it does seem amazing that the Church has so much to say about the behaviour of a minority of people whose orientation is to same sex relationships and so little to say about the phone cards that cover every telephone kiosk, or the adverts which fill the small ads of our local paper. In the equivalent of our "standing outside the headquarters", we have missed the weightier matters of the religious law – of justice in the face of exploitation and of a selfish consumer culture in which promiscuous sex is a commodity to be bought for what masquerades as personal fulfilment.

According to Fr Ken Leech, who recently retired after a long ministry mostly in East London, Christianity is ambivalent about cities, with a lengthy anti-urban polemic on the one hand, and a vision of the city of God, the holy city, on the other. Yet Christianity was, in origin, an urban movement, so much so that the words ‘pagan’ (people of the countryside’) and ‘heathen’ (people of the heath) were used in contrast to urban Christians. Ken writes,

It is a central task of urban theology to question, undermine and expose false values which put profits before people, private gain before public good, and ultimately the success of enterprise before the welfare of the city and all its people. (The Long Exile, p 113)

Bob Hope once said that, “London’s a wonderful city, or at least it will be when it’s finished.” The recognition that Christ is a King means that we have glimpsed the beliefs and values by which we wish to live and build ourselves, the Church, and our city. Individually and together we commit ourselves to try to live in response to a personal and corporate vision of the kingdom of God, not to join in the shouting for the blood of an easy victim.

Why are we so blind to some things and so willing to go along with the crowd? Standing before Pilate, even if we are part of the religious group and have kept our purity standing outside Pilate’s headquarters, Christ questions us all.

4. The scaffolding of spirit

Reading John 19.16b – 25a

Bach	25	Evangelist	And there they crucified him
		Chorus	Write Him not as our King...
		Evangelist	And Pilate answered...
	26	Choral	Within my heart's recesses their sprinkles bright

The music of that chorale has become for us the tune for the Palm Sunday processional hymn, "All glory, laud and honour to thee redeemer king". We will use it as we process out at the end of the service, the kingship of Christ having been revealed in the course of Holy Week by the stark events of the crucifixion. What is revealed is God, truth, love, things that are eternal; and the soldiers divided his cloths by casting lots. In a haunting phrase, T S Eliot speaks of our having the experience but missing the meaning.

This Lent, I have loved our using the R S Thomas poem, 'Emerging',
*...it is matter is the scaffolding
of spirit....*

Matter limits and restricts us. That's why dualism is so attractive. If only we could be free of these earthly bonds we would have limitless possibility and be free spirits. But matter, which restricts, limits and confines, is also what provides the scaffold, or framework, that makes any creativity possible.

Like Michelangelo's sculpture in stone,
*as form and sculpture is the prisoner
of hard rock, so in everyday life
it is the plain facts and natural happenings
that conceal God and reveal him to us
little by little under the mind's tooling.*
R S Thomas, 'Emerging'

Of course, matter is ambiguous and can be used for good and evil.

In fundraising for our present work, and only very occasionally, and under the pressure that the bills have to be paid, I have found myself remembering General Booth the founder of the Salvation Army who said, "Give me your filthy money and I will make it clean"! But actually, what we are able to do is made possible by the economy of the city and world in which we are set.

It was with quite a shock when reading a book about the abolition of slavery that I realised a significant part of London's wealth in the eighteenth century came from the slave trade. This church, built between 1721 and 1726, must have benefited indirectly from a trade that killed between 9 and 15 million. We're tainted, not, I hope, irredeemably, because we exist in creation, in a material world.

When I taught at a Theological College, training clergy, a new student told me that coming to college was like eating the apple. All his innocence about Church had disappeared and there was no going back. I should think there will be those on the PCC of this church, or on the Church of England's Pensions Board, who would recognise that observation. According to Monsignor Ronnie Knox, writing I think in the 1950's, "He who is prone to sea sickness should not go down into the engine room of the barque of Rome!"

At the time of his writing the St John Passion, Bach was a church musician. It is sobering to discover that in April 1723 he was the *third* choice for the post of Kantor at St Thomas Church in Leipzig behind Telemann, whom most of us will have heard of, and Graupner, whom most of us will not, both of whom for very different reasons turned the job down.

Bach must have had something to prove. In 5 years he wrote 150 cantatas, as well as the Magnificat (1723) and the St John (1724) and St Matthew Passions (1727). He had finite musical resources available to him: 16 first-choir singers and up to 18 instrumentalists. Cantatas were performed at 7.30 in the morning. The Oxford Companion to Music comments, "It is not unlikely that some of the performances were poor". In 1730, increasingly disenchanted with the conditions at St Thomas's Church, Bach submitted a memorandum to the church authorities setting out his minimum requirements for well-regulated church music. Their response was to threaten to reduce his salary.

Every musician, artist, architect... needs a patron. You can't be an artist in theory or abstract. Art requires commitment in particular material.

Yet, Christ's crucifixion makes clear that our lives are not defined by how well life goes, or by our good or bad luck. There are people who live transfigured in outwardly unpromising circumstances. I am often struck how people visiting a friend or relative in a hospice come away saying, 'If only we could live like that all the time'. It's as if being near to death we know how precious love is and how it transcends the moment.

Standing near the cross of Christ, in the less than promising place called Golgotha, God is revealed to us in such a way that within the limits of our lives, we are offered the opportunity to be fully human.

5. The vision of God

Reading John 19.25b – 30

Bach - **32 Aria (Bass) and chorus** O thou my Saviour give me answer

“Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.”

It is curiously difficult for us, so familiar with Matthew, Mark and Luke, to get tuned to what John is saying about Jesus. His account of the crucifixion is shorter than the other evangelists. The time between crucifixion and death is briefer than in Mark, and in Mark it was so brief that Pilate was amazed. In Mark the crucifixion was at 9am and the death of Jesus at 3pm. In John he was still before Pilate at mid-day and died in time to be buried before evening.

In John, there was no Simon of Cyrene: Jesus carried his own cross. There was no mocking, no darkness, no centurion, no cry of dereliction. He was not ‘done to’ but in control, knowing what will happen and willing it to be accomplished. No one took his life from him. Of his own accord, he gave up his spirit, laying down his life in obedience to the Father.

At which point, if you’ve been following this week’s spat between the traditionalist Evangelicals defending the view that the sacrifice of Jesus was as a substitution for our sins and the dangerously liberal Dean of St Alban’s, Jeffrey John, who suggested such a view was barbaric, you might think that Jeffrey John has a point and is being true to John’s Gospel. Jesus gave his life out of love for his friends. He did it that we might have abundant life and he did it majestically.

At the end of chapter 20 John concludes that he has written, “so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

For those who agree with Richard Dawkins, all religion is bad religion. Certainly there is plenty of evidence for him to draw on but we could counter by suggesting that there is also bad science and harmful applications of science without needing to suggest that all science is bad. What good religion does is to draw us into the worship of God, and John’s point is that that in truth good religion is life giving.

In this there is a very definite account of being human and living fully. The essence of Christianity is that our greatest happiness is to be found ‘in’ God. In John’s Gospel Jesus says “I am in the Father and the Father is in me”. Being ‘in’ implies being one and this is done so that we may be drawn in and also be at one, indwelling in God.

At the Eucharist last night, I was struck again how Jesus gives us a lesson in loving service. The master washes his disciples’ feet, and we are called to wash one another’s feet. In our culture, this is not the most popular management model or strategy for self-improvement. What Jesus is offering us is a model of selflessness in which having the confidence to lose ourselves in love we will find ourselves in God.

The Christian calling is to unselfishness and that sort of personal disinterestedness associated with, say, a judge hearing a case and determining judgement without thought of personal gain. What matters is the truth, and we stand under it.

In one of my favourite books of Christian theology, The Vision of God (first published in 1931) Kenneth Kirk wrote that the way in which unselfishness is attained is through worship. “Worship lifts the soul out of its preoccupation with itself and its activities, and centres its aspirations entirely on God.” He warns us, “not to confuse worship with the quest for ‘religious experience’ (so very popular in our day) nor with the employment of devout thoughts to stimulate moral effort (much less popular), for both these counterfeits to worship lend themselves only too readily to egocentricism”. Worship, “disinfects our egoism”. It is, “is something which *comes upon* the soul, not which is achieved by it”.

Kirk summarised, “It is not that conduct is the end of life and conduct tests it but that worship is the end of life and conduct tests it”.

In John’s Gospel, the key to Jesus’s selfless love is his being obedient and ‘in’ or at one with God - fully divine *and* fully human. Raised up on the cross we see his glory and in worship we find ourselves raised up with him.

6. The day of preparation

Reading John 19.31 – 42

Choir 39 Chorus Ruht wohl, Rest well

Unlike the other Gospels, John says that the crucifixion took place on the day of Preparation. So there was urgency to get the bodies down from the cross so that the Jews would be ready for the Passover Festival. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken to hasten their deaths. Again, what is revealed is that Jesus has already given up his life freely, and that in keeping with scripture and the will of God, not open bone has been broken. The soldier pierces his side and what flows out are water and blood, symbols of life – the water of life, baptism, new birth; the blood of the new covenant which we drink in the Eucharist to share in the resurrection.

Joseph of Arimathea, a secret disciple, and Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night are the people who take charge of his burial. The words, “The Jews”, get repeated and emphasised as though this day of preparation is the one that will reveal what John the Baptist declared back at the beginning of the Gospel: Look, here is the lamb of God”. This is a burial and a day of preparation showing the glory of God. This Passover lamb will bring a new freedom and tonight, tomorrow, Joseph and Nicodemus will no longer need to be in secret followers of Christ. This day of preparation is redolent is bursting with the latent energy of new life.

On 28 March in 2003, 19 years old Trooper Chris Finney was driving one of two armoured vehicles north of Basrah in Iraq when they came under what is euphemistically called ‘friendly fire’. Finney got himself out of the burning vehicle but saw his gunner was trapped. At no small risk to himself, he went back into the blazing vehicle, munitions exploding around him and pulled the gunner free and to relative safety. Wounded himself, he went back to the vehicle and sent a message to headquarters identifying their position and stating what had happened. As the American planes lined up to come in a second time he realised that another soldier was trapped in the other vehicle. He tried to get him out but this time failed, collapsing at the side of the blazing vehicles. Awarded the George Cross (not a Victoria Cross because this was not in enemy action) the citation concludes:

During these attacks and their horrifying aftermath, Trooper Finney displayed clear-headed courage and devotion to his comrades which was out of all proportion to his age and experience. Acting with complete disregard for his own safety even when wounded, his bravery was of the highest order throughout.

Because the Vicar of St Martin’s is chaplain to the VCGC Association, I was able to ask Chris Finney what made him do it. He replied, “It’s what you do for your mates. It was instinct, anyone would have done it”.

Lots of people have tried to analyse what it is that prepares people to behave like this under pressure in the moment they are tested. There’s no formula. Being well trained and establishing good habits certainly helps. I have heard a surgeon talk about the way in which he fell back on instincts formed in his training when an operation went wrong and he didn’t have time to think out what to do. We probably all have some examples from our own lives when we have just scrambled through until we have the time to stop and reflect.

St Martin's is in a period of preparation, more like two years than a day, and the planning before was extensive and arduous. Between the first Sunday May and the last Sunday of September the church will be closed and we will be working on, I think, nine different sites. Our one absolute commitment to remain here is the temporary building for the most vulnerable and needy who turn to us for help through The Connection.

St Martin's is an earthy sort of place pitched as we are, "Half way 'twixt heaven and Charing Cross". It has always struck me we are a Good Friday church, with this Three Hours service the liturgical centrepiece of our annual cycle of worship. In this community, people who know their own complex vulnerability gather around the cross of Jesus and find ourselves transformed by God's love. The day of preparation already bears much fruit, and we wait for the new lamb of God and to our being born again in the resurrection of Easter.