**2nd April 2017**

**Lent 5**

**Matthew 26**

Divorce proceedings have finally started. The EU President Donald Tusk was given a letter from Prime Minister Theresa May on Wednesday formally announcing that the UK wished to leave the EU. ‘We love you but we’re leaving. Can we stay on good terms and if we do we’ll help in the defence of Europe’ was the basic gist of the letter. Two years of working out the terms of the divorce are now before us – arguing about who gets what. Let’s hope we don’t just end up with the CD collection.

It has been inevitable since last June’s referendum that this would happen. Theresa May has had to sit round the table with the other EU leaders knowing that she would be giving notice to quit. It must have been a little uncomfortable and will get increasingly so. The European Union has become the European Disunion.

As we continue our journey through Matthew’s gospel from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday we come to the events of Maundy Thursday evening and Matthew’s account of the Last Supper. We know it as communion – yet the original supper was more a disunion. Sat around the table with Jesus would be all his so called friends and close disciples. One of their number would betray him to his death. One would openly deny him. The rest would desert him. Jesus knew this, yet still dined with them.

This Lent we have been looking at the passion of Jesus. Not just his suffering but what he was passionate about. The story of the last supper reveals a number of his passions….

**First of all he had a passion for inclusion, radical welcome forgiveness and understanding**. Shared meals was one of the most distinctive features of Jesus’s public activity. He often taught at meals, banquets were topics of his parables, and his meal practice was criticized by his opponents. Scribes and Pharisees, the holy people, aggressively ask, ‘Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners (e.g. Matt 11.19). The issue is that Jesus eats with undesirables, the marginalised, the outcast, in a society in which the people with whom one shared a meal was hugely significant. Jesus meal practice was about inclusion in a society with sharp social boundaries. It had both religious and political significance: religious because it was done in the name of the kingdom of God; political because it affirmed a very different vision of society. It brought enemies together. It accepted those who were failures. It welcomed those who were seen as beyond the pale. Jesus brought together ‘them ‘and ‘us’.

Last week was the funeral of Martin McGuiness. It took place in the Catholic Cathedral of Derry (or Londonderry – depending on which side of the line you live) It is not usual for the congregation to break into applause when someone enters a church for a funeral service but that day the people in that Catholic church did because the leader of the Democratic Unionist Party, Arlene Foster, had turned up. Her father had been shot by the IRA during the troubles and as a sixteen year old her school bus had been attacked by an IRA bomb. Martin McGuiness never renounced violence or apologised for the IRA’s violence yet he turned to politics instead of the bombs and the bullets to further his community’s cause. Foster had turned up with gritted teeth and could have easily stayed away but her choice to attend was magnanimous and dignified and was appreciated warmly by all who were there and saluted by former President Bill Clinton. He said about McGuiness, with words that could have applied to Arlene Foster at that moment, that ‘he expanded the definition of ‘us’ and shrank the definition of ‘them’’.

*‘He expanded the definition of ‘us’ and shrank the definition of ‘them’’.*

That is what Jesus did in his ministry. Love your enemies, love you neighbour as yourself. Here at his last supper he sits round a table with people who will desert, deny and betray him – yet he still loves them and shares food with them. The meals and hospitality he shared were an attempt to take down the barriers between ‘us’ and ‘them’. As Britain recovers from the Westminster terror attack and as we press the button for Brexit as a society we have to work hard to ensure our definition of ‘us’ does not harden so that we erect our walls against ‘them’.

Churches are never made up of like-minded people. A test of the maturity of any community is its ability to tolerate differences without creating an ‘us’ and ‘them’ situation. It’s how conflicts are handled and released, hidden differences and hurts allowed to come to the surface; how do you learn to live together; sometimes by ignoring what you do not want to see, or just accepting and developing ways of living with the irreconcilable – as we do with all relationships.

Here Jesus is lovingly drawing out those hurts and differences round that Last Supper. Telling Peter he will deny him. Suggesting to Judas that betrayal is in his eyes. Predicting that all the others will fall away. But Jesus would stay faithful, with undying love for all his followers and the world. These same disciples who were faithless would be restored, forgiven, and offered a second chance and more. Judas himself I’m sure would have been forgiven and restored, had he not tragically taken his own life in despair. That despair is perhaps the greatest sin –to believe that God’s love cannot reach you. That you are beyond the love of God.

Jesus expanded the definition of ‘us’ and shrank the definition of ‘them’. In all our values and decisions let us be mindful of the passion of Jesus to love and see love increase and to include and not set up barriers between people. This is what Jesus would do.

**Jesus shows his passion for justice around this table**. The meals of Jesus were not ritual meals in which food only had symbolic meaning, like our tiny square of bread and thimble full of wine. They were real meals, real food. In his teaching ‘bread’ symbolized the material basis of existence, as in the Lord’s Prayer: give us this day our daily bread. For Jesus usual audience – peasants – enough food for the day – was one of the two central survival issues of their lives (the other was debt – hence the other clause in the Lord’s Prayer – ‘forgive us our debts, as we forgive the debts of others). There is an echo in the Last supper of the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus took bread, wine, as he took loaves and fish, looked up to heaven, blessed them and broke them and gave them to the people and they had enough.

In the feeding of the five thousand (Matt 14.13-21) the disciples when they see the vast need of the crowd tell Jesus to send them away. Jesus in reply says ‘you give them something to eat’. Instead of the disciples evading responsibility for the hunger of the crowd, Jesus forces them to participate with him, step by step in feeding the hungry mass. If you know the story - they take what is already there and distribute it, everyone gets what they need as the food is stewarded by the disciples.

The Last Supper was a Passover meal and the prayers for that remind those sharing in the meal that all that we have belongs to God. God calls us to steward his creation well, so that no one has to be someone else’s’ slave to earn a living, but all have enough. There is just distribution and all are fed. That is why you all get the same amount of bread and the same portion of wine. We enact the will of God for a just distribution of the earth’s goods.

**Jesus shows his passion for salvation and liberation at the Last Supper.** As a Passover meal. Jesus’ Last Super resonates with the story of the exodus from Egypt, his people’s story of their birth as a nation. A story of bondage, deliverance and liberation, the most important story they knew. If you have shared in a Jewish Passover or Seder meal you will know they bring the exodus into the present. They remember and give thanks for the precious gift of freedom and pray for those who are not free.

This is one of the prayers: *in every generation it is the duty of all people to regard themselves as though they personally came out of Egypt. Tell your sons and daughters, we do this because of what God did for me when I came out of Egypt.*

*We rejoice at the miracle of being delivered from sorrow into joy,*

*from weeping into celebrating*

*From darkness into light*

*From slavery into freedom.*

Jesus is passionate about freedom. Being free from whatever enslaves us today. In the original Passover meal the blood of a lamb was put on the doorposts of the houses of the Hebrew slaves so that the angel of death, ‘the destroyer’ would pass over those houses and not kill the first born. This was the tenth plague that would be the hammer that would break Pharaoh’s hardened heart and finally liberate the slaves. (sadly, some people need something terrible to happen to break their hard heartedness). Jesus takes up the importance of body and blood as he introduces into the Passover meal those famous words over the bread ‘Take eat this is my body’ and over the wine ‘Drink from this all of you. This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’.

Jesus knew he was going to die. If he lives for God’s divine justice in the world, insisting that all the world belongs to God, all people are his, he knew he was up against those who believe they are more special than others : ‘us’ against ‘them’. He is up against those with vested interest and wealth who will not acknowledge that all the world belongs to God, that we are all tenant farmers and resident aliens and the earth is not our own but we are invitees and guests at a table not our own. We have property and land and we have worked hard for – it is ours! Some upstart who challenges that is going to be met with force and in that society met with a violent death from human injustice in a world that refuses recognition of God’s ownership and our position as stewards of God’s creation.

The language of body and blood points to a violent death like the death of a Passover lamb. Blood will be spilt, the blood of sacrifice. We talk of those who sacrifice themselves for our freedom. Just last week tributes where made to PC Keith Palmer for standing in the way of the Westminster attacker Khalid Masood. He was rightly hailed as a defender of our freedom and democracy: those who run towards trouble rather than run away from it. Jesus is running towards trouble in the cause of love and freedom and justice. His blood, his sacrifice will make the difference. It will show the undying commitment and love of God towards the world. It will prove God’s forgiveness for the sin of the world. As many have shed blood through all sorts of suffering, Jesus too will enter into that suffering and shed his own blood, for us.

There is a saying ‘what are you prepared to die for?’ Paul say in Romans chapter 5: *Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die.****8****But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

Christ died for us – willing to spill his blood for our freedom and liberation.

What enslaves us? Where do we need freedom and liberation? What do we need saving from? Jesus went about healing, giving sight to the blind, opening the ears of the deaf, forgiving those who felt condemned and worthless, changing hearts and minds and lives.

Love changes things. Just like being invited to a meal and receiving the love and warmth of hospitality makes you feel wanted, loved , cherished, listened to, appreciated, restored to friendship, accepted and reconciled – so the Last Supper, so our Communion, speaks at so many levels to our basic human need for belonging and acceptance and freedom. Make this meal an opportunity for that. Pray for the Lord’s touch in your life, to know once again his love and sacrifice for you, given for you.

Meals are for sharing. As you eat bread and drink wine you participate in Christ, we join with Jesus in his passion and mission for the world.

He is with us.

We by eating and drinking in the name of Jesus, are with him.

His passion for inclusion and acceptance becomes ours.

His passion that the world may have bread, becomes ours.

His passion for justice,

For liberation from bondage and that the world may know his undying love, becomes ours.

Jesus invites us to walk with him along the path that leads through death to new life. May he become ours and we become his.

*Bibliography:*

*M Borg and J D Crossan, The Last Week, SPCK 2008*