**9th April 2017 Palm Sunday**

**Matthew 27**

This has been the week of the Easter Egg controversy. The National Trust is facing a boycott among its members after renaming their Easter Egg hunt. The event, which is sponsored by Cadbury, was called the 'Easter Egg Trail' in recent years, however, its name this year is the 'Cadbury Egg Hunt'.

Theresa May has described the decision to drop the word Easter from the name of Cadbury and National Trust egg hunts as "absolutely ridiculous".

Her comments come after the Archbishop of York said calling the event the Cadbury Egg Hunt was like "spitting on the grave" of the firm's Christian founder, John Cadbury.

The British Humanist Association, never one to miss a bit of faith bashing, chirped up: "Easter is a fun time of year for people of all ages and beliefs. It's disappointing that the Church saw fit to whip up a storm in an eggcup over this and in a bid to maintain its relevance in an increasingly non-religious country."

The leader of the Liberal Democrats Tim Farron said, tongue in cheek, "This is a eggs-tremely big distraction. I think we all feel poached by this whole sorry saga, but none of us more so than Cadbury's and the National Trust, who have done nothing wrong and are right to feel egg-rieved by the criticism they have received."

Personally, I'm quite shell shocked by it all! I hope it doesn't all boil over into a fresh referendum on Eggs-it!! :)) We might end up with soldiers on the streets.  No Yoke!

It is of course a trivial distraction to the main issues of the world and the main issues of Easter. Our faith is not about Easter eggs but about the death and resurrection of Jesus. Easter eggs are just a chance to escape reality and literally and metaphorically sweeten things up for the kids. The reality of the Easter story touches our realities in the world today.

During Lent we have been looking at the story of Holy Week as told by Matthew’s gospel from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday. The theme has been the passion of Jesus. Not just the suffering of Jesus but what Jesus was passionate about. Over these last few weeks we have seen the passion of Jesus for integrity, service, justice, inclusivity, truth, the love and forgiveness of God and his criticism of those who in power who serve themselves and oppress others. We have seen enough to realise why the rulers and authorities of his day saw him as a threat and wanted him killed and done away with.

So as we move into chapter 27 we move into the drama of that first Good Friday and the trial, torture and crucifixion. We move into the passion of Christ, his suffering for the world and his identification with the suffering in the world.

This week at least 70 people have been killed in a suspected chemical attack on the rebel-held town of Khan Sheikhoun in north-western Syria.

Clinics treating the wounded were also bombed. Victims experienced symptoms including redness of the eyes, foaming from the mouth, constricted pupils, blue facial skin and lips, severe shortness of breath and asphyxiation.

The Syrian military denied using any chemical agents, while its ally Russia said an air strike hit a rebel depot full of chemical munitions. Those excuses have been strongly rebuffed by the watching world.

The Trump administration launched missile strikes in retaliation and to deter the Syrian regime from using chemical weapons again.

Peace remains as elusive as ever and the suffering of ordinary people continues.

Good Friday will remind us that God is not remote nor detached from the suffering of the world. Some people raise their fists to heaven and blame God for their lot, cursing God for their suffering, but the God we know through Jesus is the God who has hung on a cross and cried out too ‘My God my God why have you forsaken me?’

The author Dorothy Sayers put it thus:

*For whatever reason God chose to make man as he is, limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death – he had the honesty and courage to take his own medicine. Whatever game he is playing with his creation, he has kept his own rules and played fair. He can extract nothing from man that he has not extracted from himself.*’

Let’s reflect on the sufferings of Christ and how they identify with the suffering of the world.

First of all there is the trial and torture. Pilate presented Jesus to the crowd early on that Good Friday morning. The chief priests and religious rulers had been out to get Jesus for a long time because everything he said and did posed a threat to the church they had built for themselves. These were people not interested in loving God and seeking truth and justice but in maintaining their privileges and the status quo. Now it seemed as if Jesus had played straight into their hands with his blasphemous talk of destroying the temple and coming like a Son of Man in judgement.

Pilate asks Jesus ‘are you the King of the Jews? You should probably read this with a tone of mockery: Pilate looks at this bloodied and beaten peasant before him and say ‘are YOU the king of the Jews?’ Jesus gives an ambiguous answer: ‘you have said so’. Again there may be a tone of mockery back ‘YOU have said so?’ Perhaps Jesus also knows the inevitability of this trial. There has been a prejudgment. Nothing he says will change the verdict. So Jesus chooses not to say anything. It takes great courage in the face of violent authorities to keep silent. But Jesus knows that they have made their mind up before even examining the evidence.

It is very difficult to get people to change their minds? We all make instant judgements. Oh I don’t like him. I know what I think and you’re not going to change me? She didn’t impress me the moment she walked in the room. Judgement has already been given: people don’t want to listen or look beyond the surface.

The mock trial of Jesus continues. Pilate realises it is the custom at Passover to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd, probably honouring the great escape of the Jews from slavery in Egypt by God’s redemptive act. There is another prisoner called Jesus: Jesus Barabbas. Mark in his gospel says he was an insurrectionist who had turned violent and killed people in the rebellion.

Which Jesus do you want? The popular violent revolutionary or the non-violent, love your enemies peace and flowers guy? Gather a crowd of men together, all concerned that their standards of macho-ness should prevail and how many would vote for the warrior, the one who fights to the death: and how many would vote for the wimp who refuses to fight and says love your enemies?

The chief priest and rulers had also rigged the crowd and persuaded them to shout for Barabbas. Crucify Jesus they shout.

This must be a very different crowd from those who had acclaimed Jesus a hero on Palm Sunday. This was a crowd accepted into Pilate’s courtyard by invitation. A crowd vetted and friendly to the Roman Empire and all the Empire stands for. So away with those who threaten dissent from the values of Empire. Crucify him.

Only in Matthew’s gospel does Pilate wash his hands of guilt. A callous and weak act and evasion of responsibility. Only in Matthew’s gospel does the crowd shout ‘his blood be on us and our children’ a verse that has played a significant role in Christian persecution of Jews through the centuries. It terrifying how a verse of scripture can be used to justify discrimination and hatred. The ovens of Auschwitz should burn into our souls a wariness for twisting texts of Holy Scripture to justify hate.

Having been handed over to Pilate’s soldiers. Jesus like so many political prisoners before and after him, is tortured and humiliated. He is flogged, then undressed, a sign of further humiliation and powerlessness and put through a mock coronation ceremony with a scarlet robe and a crown of thorns and a staff as a sceptre in his hand. He is then spat on and hit repeatedly with the staff.

I subscribe to Amnesty international and also the Barnabas Fund and every week I get horrific stories of persecution and torture the graphic details of which make you want to turn away and ignore because it’s too painful to consider and imagine. Those stories constantly remind me that we live in a violent and brutal world. It is no surprise when periodically we get stories of soldiers and police officers overstepping the mark of their profession. They are subject to violence and aggression and that cycle of brutality catches people up in it. That’s not to excuse it but to understand it. Only recently a Royal Marine Alexander Blackburn, who shot dead an injured Taliban fighter in Afghanistan had his murder conviction reduced to manslaughter on the grounds of diminished responsibility. Violence diminishes all humanity.

Torture and persecution and violence can also be emotional not physical. A couple of generations ago leaving an abusive marriage, when rape within marriage was tolerated, was seen as a shameful thing. Marriage was for life: for better or for worse. You were letting the side down. Letting God down, because like Jesus you were called to suffer.

Pregnancy outside of marriage often meant you had to leave your community because you couldn’t live with the disgrace. Some pretended that their mother had miraculously had another baby. Worse still you could have been sent to a convent for wayward girls. Or have your illegitimate child sent to Australia. Thank God attitudes have changed. Thank God society has moved on. Thank God we don’t put up with oppressive injustice anymore.

I was moved listening to Iain McDonald’s testimony as a gay Minister on Thursday. I spoke with him before and after his talk about his journey of faith. In the sixties and seventies, having come out as a gay man he was subject to vile persecution: people calling him perverted, or a paedophile. Christians telling him he would burn in hell. I knew that I was complicit in this. Those of the things I have said and done. I was part of churches that saw gay people as not natural, they had rebelled against God by perverting their true nature and that they should repent and change their lives or else face the consequences.

Iain had repeatedly been told he was a nice guy but because he was in gay relationship he couldn’t train to be a minister. Eventually he did but then couldn’t find a church that would accept him. Eight churches turned him down. Nice bloke, very godly, but you’re in a gay relationship so we are not having you. That’s a lot of rejection and often vitriolic opposition he received.

I said to him why didn’t you give up on the church. I have known many gay people who have. I sadly know many gay people who have been so attacked that they have tried to commit suicide and on some occasions sadly succeeded. Iain just said that he trusted in the love of Jesus and that would win through in the end. Following Christ meant that he wouldn’t give in to hate. I was humbled by his graciousness.

If you didn’t get to the meeting on Thursday a transcript of the talk will be available soon alongside the talk from Paul Stokes. They are both important reads. If you support same sex marriage you should especially read Paul Stokes talk for the case against. And vice versa if you are against same sex marriage, read Iain’s talk. Be open to challenge and be open to the Spirit’s prompting.

Jesus had an open heart for mercy and love for those who lived in fear and isolation in his society. When I was in prison did you visit me? Those who are the victims of injustice can easily be overlooked. Jesus attracted the tax collectors and the prostitutes and the sinners. Those who had been forgiven much, loved much.

At the foot of the cross people mock him. He saved others but he can’t save himself! He trusts in God let God save him! Jesus knows what it is like to receive the insults and the mockery. His cry of dereliction ‘My God, my God why have you forsaken me?’ is a deep cry of anguish. Who hasn’t felt let down, abandoned, defeated. Who hasn’t, on receiving bad news, let out the cry ‘Why me God?’

That cry come from Psalm 22. The psalm describes a person experiencing immense suffering and intense hostility. Like Job the sufferer doesn’t understand why he is suffering, but feels forsaken by God, to whom he has been faithful. Though he has trusted in God since birth, now in his extremity he is scorned, despised and mocked. He feels abandoned by everybody, even God. He fears he is near death. Indeed he feels so near death that the onlookers are beginning to divide up his possessions, like self-obsessed relatives who are working out the will before the person has died.

But if you read on in that psalm the desperate suffering and anguished abandonment of the first half becomes in the second half a prayer of thanksgiving for deliverance and vindication. The two parts combine to create a psalm of pain and deliverance, of a righteous sufferer crying out in honesty and pain and then being vindicated by God. It reminds us that you may be suffering, it may be your Good Friday, but Sunday is coming, a new day, a day of resurrection. Like Jesus, in all our pain and agony - hang on to faith as God hangs on to you.

This week was the 49th anniversary of the death of Martin Luther King the civil rights activist. In the same week Pepsi had to withdraw an advert featuring the super model Kendall Jenner. In the advert she defuses a protest by offering a policeman a can of Pepsi.

Martin Luther King’s daughter Bernice King made her feelings clear, tweeting: “If only Daddy would have known about the power of #Pepsi.”

Like Jesus, Martin Luther King was prepared to sacrifice his life because of his passion for the kingdom of God. He died because of the sin of the world. Like Jesus, he was prepared to die for his passion for God’s justice and peace but he wasn’t prepared to kill for God’s justice and peace.

On the eve of his death he gave a sermon that was prophetic of his martyrdom:

*Like anybody, I would like to live a long life.
Longevity has its place.
But I'm not concerned about that now.
I just want to do God's will.
And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain.
And I've looked over.
And I've seen the Promised Land.
I may not get there with you.
But I want you to know tonight,
that we, as a people will get to the Promised Land.*

I remember using his words to address the funeral of a couple of black teenagers who were killed in gangland violence in Moss Side Manchester when I was a student minister there in the early 1990s. The local black community were seething with anger and wanting revenge killings. There were reports that some of them had turned up to the funeral with knives and even guns. Trembling before them I quoted the words of Martin Luther king:

*Returning violence for violence multiplies violence,
adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars.
Darkness cannot drive out darkness:
only light can do that.
Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.*

Jesus refused to hate on that cross. That’s why it is a Good Friday. Good comes out of it. The Promised Land breaks out of the tomb of despair on Sunday.

Jesus goes through our suffering. He dies our death. He takes on the sin and violence and hatred of the world and gives back mercy and love.

It’s a wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died. Forbid it Lord that we should boast save in the death of Christ our God.

Love so amazing, so divine, demands our souls, our lives, our all.