

St. George's Sermons:

18<sup>th</sup> April (*Parish Communion*), 2<sup>nd</sup> May (*from Matins & All Age/Baptism*)

ST GEORGES PRESHUTE

10.00 am Parish Communion

18<sup>th</sup> April 2010

Easter 3

Acts 9.1-6

Psalm 30

Revelation 5.11-14

John 21.1-19

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Service, Worthiness and Vision.

Just recently a young soldier in Afghanistan was awarded the Military Cross. This 18 year old who had only served in the Forces for less than a year was awarded the medal for rescuing a wounded officer whilst under enemy fire. Predictably he said with normal military understatement, "I was only doing my job." You are not awarded the Military Cross for "only doing your job" but only for feats of exceptional bravery under stress. We are fortunate indeed in this country to be defended by members of the armed forces who display such courage. But it is not just such exceptional conduct that we should applaud; for it is only when we hear of such outstanding behaviour that we should be reminded that there are thousands more who are "just doing their job" on our behalf. At such moments we should pause and give thanks for their service too.

Service is also the key motivation for those who enter into public life. At this time when a General Election is looming and a new Parliament will soon be formed, we might consider the motivations of those who stand for election. I am sure that the assembled counsellors will agree that it

represents their wish to make a difference in this community and that they are willing to give of their time and talents to that end. The trouble is that just recently many politicians in the national parliament have been examined and found wanting regarding their expenses which has tarnished this noble motif of self sacrifice. I am confident that Marlborough Town Council is incorruptible; at least I hope so. The large number of MPs leaving parliament at this election will, hopefully, be replaced by more worthy members.

Worthiness is not always something that people think about, it seems these days. In fact the word can be used in a rather condescending way. “Because I’m worth it” is a sort of brash smokescreen to justify all sorts of selfishness. But here we are in a church building celebrating a worship service. And the word worship derives from “worth-ship” – meaning giving God his worth. Christians believe that it is only through acknowledging that our worthiness derives from Jesus in his incarnation, ministry and especially his death on the cross, which enables us to be counted worthy before God. In other words it is a gift that we receive rather than a state we generate for ourselves.

Finally Vision. Most sensible people are wary of visionaries. I heard of a vicar once who saw a vision of the devil’s eye in the altar frontal of his church. Imagine the embroidery guild’s horror when they discovered that their fine appliqué work had been consumed in the flames – all because of his vision. However, I would urge you to domesticate the visionaries among

us. They may not have spectacular revelations of the Virgin Mary or whatever but there are people around in this very church who can see the way that God wants us to go. Even in small ways myself I have detected the right course to pursue, often in conjunction with other visionaries who themselves would be just as reluctant to label themselves as such.

Service, Worthiness and Vision are all well represented in our readings from Scripture today. In our first reading we heard of Saul, the great persecutor of the infant church being struck down in a visionary experience, blinded and in need of help from Ananias on the Straight Street in Damascus. I visited that city a few years ago and the street still runs dead straight through the *souk* or bazaar there. Paul's – as he became- vision turned out to be life changing. It certainly did not offer any easy option for him. From this event a lifetime of preaching, teaching and service followed as well as his meeting opposition from Christians who were sometimes hostile to his ideas. His conversion though remained the focal point from which the rest of his life and work flowed. And I submit that anyone dedicated to serving others needs just such a fundamental conviction in order to sustain them in their enterprise.

In the Book of Revelation, St John sees a scroll with seven seals that require opening. He laments that there is no one found worthy to break the seals and open the scroll but he is told that there is one who is worthy, the lamb who was slain. This is one of the most peculiar images in the Bible, I think, since

a lamb, - if you observe them at this time of year - is a creature who is fragile and in need of constant motherly care. Yet in the apocalypse, this is the creature that was slaughtered who is deemed worthy for the task. The metaphor is of course meant to evoke the slaughtered son of God whose resurrection we celebrate in Eastertide. He is the one who is made worthy through God's bestowal of new life on him who was crucified.

And in our Gospel reading today the passage about Jesus' encounter with Peter at the lakeside is a sort of afterthought to the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel which is full of rich imagery. But the message in the second part of the story is clear. Peter is called upon three times to serve Jesus' followers. Why three times? Wouldn't we get a bit cheesed off if Jesus kept repeating our commission? Of course, with Peter, this represents a reversal of what had happened on that Thursday night when Jesus was arrested. There in the firelight frightened Peter had denied that he knew Jesus and the cock crowed. His penance is to serve the church even to martyrdom.

So Service, Worthiness and Vision. All here in God's world. Amazingly, God calls each of us to his service through our service of other folk. He makes us his worthy disciples through his gift of relationship and self-giving love. And he will give us the vision to see our destiny, if we but give him the time and space to reveal it to each one of us. The risen Jesus still calls, "Follow me."

ST GEORGES PRESHUTE

11.30 am Matins

2<sup>nd</sup> May 2010

Easter 5

Acts 11.1-18

Psalm 148

Revelation 21.1-6

John 13.31-35

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*Alleluia Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed Alleluia.***

I am not sure about you but sometimes when I go to church in Eastertide I feel that some of the Liturgy sounds a bit like we're flogging a dead horse. There's a sense that Lent has taken its toll on our preparations for the greatest festival in the Christian year and that once we have gone through Holy Week with its rich provision for following Jesus in his last week on earth, there's a sort of huge sigh of relief that it's all over for another year. Blow off steam on Easter day and then let's get back to normal. Certainly quite a few of my clergy colleagues act as though this were the case. You can't find a clergyperson for love nor money in Easter Week they are all on holiday – or in hospital. And then comes the notorious Second Sunday of Easter, popularly called Low Sunday because that's the likely adjective used of the congregation numbers that day. So when you get to the fifth Sunday of Easter, well can't we sort of fast forward to that nice sounding ordinary time? The clue to any counter argument lays in that little word *of*. No longer do we have seasons of the Christian year marked by their position *after* a great feast but now we have Sundays *of* Easter *of* Christmas or *of* Epiphany to show that the festival celebration continues.

Now in the case of Eastertide this has always been so, since the Christian calendar and the Jewish calendar coincide at this time of year. Jesus was killed at Passover, that's why Easter still moves about according to the moon in the spring (you might remember 2008 when we had the earliest Easter you can get – March 23<sup>rd</sup>? Well next year we will have the latest – 24<sup>th</sup> April). Jewish Passover marked the great act of rescue and salvation by God at the Red Sea when the Israelites escaped and Pharaoh's chariots were overwhelmed in the waters. The Jews counted a full 50 days to the first fruits harvest when they recalled the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. The festival is still marked by the reading of the sacred Law scrolls. This 50 day period gave the feast its name - Pentecost and the Christian feast remembers that the disciples were empowered to continue the work of Christ on that day in the miraculous ability to become instant language translators. So we have a longish time not to think so much about the Israelite tribes wandering around the desert but to ponder and meditate on the great salvation that God wrought for us in the Resurrection.

The Resurrection of Jesus is something that every Christian must believe in. It is an absolute fundamental. However, the concept is not straightforward. The earliest evidence we have comes not from the gospels and the sort of circumstantial evidence of the empty tomb, but rather from St Paul and his recording of the visions of the risen Christ that were experienced by the early Christians. Now the trouble with visions is that many are sceptical

about their veracity. Most of us are wary of accounts of strange occult happenings or necromancers or shamans. Even the great pilgrimage sites built on visionary experience at Lourdes or Knock or Fatima carry with them a slight air of unease. Might our faith be built on a chimera or some sort of hysteria? Well, the fact is that, like it or lump it, we do rely to an enormous extent on the faith of those who have gone before us. But at least we are standing on the shoulders of giants like St Paul who experienced the vision of the risen Lord on the Damascus road or St Peter who experienced the vision of opening the church to Gentiles at Joppa. Personally I am content with the explanation that two thousand years of Christianity rests on a doctrine that God is at work in, not only the life of Jesus Christ, but also powerfully in his new life that those disciples experienced. But it is God who makes this possible through a unique occurrence. And I believe that it is this conviction that God has power over death itself that is so mysterious and counter intuitive that those who wished to claim it as reality made somewhat heavy weather of it by, amongst others, stories such as the lovely tale of the raising of Dorcas by St Peter that we heard last week. Presumably Dorcas and Lazarus and the widow of Nain's son had only a temporary restoration to life before they died again, but the larger claim that we need to adopt is that with Jesus it was different. Only through resurrection by God could Jesus still be a living presence among us even to this moment and in this place. Only this belief will do if we are to encounter the so-called Real Presence in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. It is this huge and

ultimately mysterious claim that sets us apart and it's in the acknowledgement of the same that we join this institution called the church. In many ways it is easier to celebrate the Incarnation of God – Emmanuel – God with us for 40 days of the Christmas and Epiphany Season. It feels a bit more cosy to assert that God could become a man and dwell among us. The Resurrection on the other hand takes a bit more courage and bravura to adhere to when sceptical friends and colleagues probe our beliefs. It might be easier if we have had a vision of the risen Lord ourselves or undergone some dramatic conversion experience like St Paul or the Pentecost flames given to the 12 disciples. But I guess for most of us we struggle a bit and hence, perhaps, our reluctance to keep on shouting *Alleluia* for such a long period of time. I would like to suggest that if you feel this way – as I do sometimes - that you take courage in the experience of the here and now. None of us would be worshipping today unless there had been some spiritual experience in our lives. Maybe we knew a holy person, or we were touched by an act of kindness or, at a moment of crisis, met with him who bore the cross for us. Whatever it was, use that experience as you meditate on the reality of Jesus being in your life. And if he is in *your* life then he is the life of the person sitting next to you and in front and behind too. When we exchange the Peace the risen Christ stands among us just as concretely as he did among those frightened first disciples in their upper room. If Jesus is precious to you seek him out not just in your own life where resurrection is a reality but in the lives of those around you. Then we will know what it is to be truly an Easter people for whom *Alleluia* is the only song.

1,188

ST GEORGE PRESHUTE  
10.00 am All Age/Baptism  
2<sup>nd</sup> May 2010  
Easter 5

Acts 11.1-18  
*Psalm 148*  
*Revelation 21.1-6*  
John 13.31-35

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*Welcome*

Very special welcome to Scarlett Richards-Long and Barney Pike.  
Also a warm welcome to their parents and supporters.  
Please no photographs or videos during the service but there will be an opportunity to take pictures at the end.

*Talk*

Last year we had a baptism at the service on Easter Day when we actually took off all the baby's clothes and gave him a good dunking in the font water before reclothing him in a white robe. Don't worry! No need to remove clothes of Scarlett and Barney.

But it did remind us of two things. One that in the earliest times of the church Easter was the only day in the whole year when you could get baptised and become a member of the church.

Two that you had to remove all your clothes and jewellery – even as an adult and have buckets of water poured over you. That’s how we know there must have been women deacons in the early church, for modesty’s sake. But why all this nakedness and only at Easter?

Well at this time of the year we concentrate on the foundation of the Christian Faith- the Resurrection of Jesus from death. And the symbol of Resurrection is baptism. It is through the waters of baptism that we pass from one state to another, from sinful human beings to new life in Christ. Just like those Israelites did who crossed the Red Sea passed to a new life in the Promised Land, so believers pass through water marked with the sign of the cross in order to become Christians.

At the Red Sea and in the Resurrection of Jesus, Christians see at work the love of God in saving his people and bestowing on them his Spirit

It is into that love that Scarlett and Barney will be baptised and God’s spirit will enter them today as we seal them with water at the font as members of the body of Christ – the church.

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