

Homilet for Compline on Wednesday of Holy Week, 17th April 2019

My brothers and sisters: I would ask that you pray for me that I may speak to you in the name of the living God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Holy Week is riddled with paradox.

For example:

- Three days ago, we echoed the words of those who welcomed Jesus triumphantly into Jerusalem, shouting ‘Hosanna to the Son of David!’ and ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!’¹. Yet, just two days from now, we will similarly echo the paradoxical words of (broadly) the same people as they scream for his crucifixion.
- Tomorrow, we will mark the institution of the Eucharist with Jesus’s words that, paradoxically, bread is his flesh and wine his blood.
- The day after that, we will commemorate the paradoxical death of an eternal God, not in the Nietzschean sense, but in human form.
- And, of course, Holy Week by definition ends as we celebrate the greatest paradox of our faith: that death is the way to new life.

So, what can we do when presented with so much paradox: praise/condemnation, bread/flesh, wine/blood, death/life? One option is simply to ignore them and recite the liturgy innocently but perhaps rather mindlessly. The other option is to try and resolve the unresolvable; that way madness possibly lies. I would like to suggest a (classic Anglican) middle way.

¹ Mt 21:9

Perhaps the message for us when we encounter paradox in our faith is that it is a sign that, despite our wonderfully detailed and powerful understanding of the world, there yet remain realities which cannot be fully explained by human enquiry. Maybe paradox is, in a sense, what humans perceive when we start to get close to a universal divine truth that the human mind cannot completely comprehend. Just as Hagar² or Jacob³, for example, did not expect, as humans, to survive the direct sight of God, perhaps paradox is the intellectual equivalent that explains why we cannot, as Paul suggests⁴, fully understand God in this life.

So, as we enter the final glorious yet terrifying days of Holy Week – more paradox! – and grapple once again with its enormous themes and ideas, perhaps we should neither ignore nor worry about our struggles with the paradoxes but instead simply offer them humbly to God in prayer, laying them on the altar of his all-encompassing love. Because perhaps true divine love – the overriding idea of Holy Week, in fact, of our faith as a whole – is the one thing that has no paradox associated with it. As the anonymous C14 author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* puts it, ‘To our intellect, God is evermore incomprehensible’, but ‘by love he may be gotten and holden’. Which is one more reason why we can trust in God’s love so completely and unflinchingly.

Amen.

² Gen 16:13

³ Gen 32:30

⁴ 1Co 13:12