

Monday of Holy Week 2023

The greater and perfect Tent

John 12:1-11; Heb. 9-11-15

May my spoken words be faithful to the written word, that we might be led to the Living Word, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

'Come with us Marc, book yourself on; I think you'll really enjoy it!' I wasn't so sure, but trusting my new friend Graham, himself a vocational explorer, I did book myself on and as the time approached, pleased enough with the purchase I'd made, I spent time getting used to it. And to misquote the late, great Kenneth Williams – it was fairly easy to get it up, but getting it down was a quite different matter!

That trip to the Taizé community in August 2011 did nothing whatever to swell my enthusiasm for camping, but it did mark the first ploddings of a walk toward religious life to say nothing ongoing priesthood which seem to be continuing steadily enough. I still can't really stand camping, but I enjoyed the company with whom I shared that week in France and the rich experience of the community's life in Taizé. It would have been so easy for me to cry off, to avoid the ignominy and awkwardness (as I saw it) presented by the prospect of pitching a tent. I'm glad I wasn't deterred though; I would have missed out on so much. I think, perhaps, I'd have missed precisely what God was trying to say.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews wishes to speak to us at the start of this week of pilgrimage, not about camping in a literal sense of course, but rather to address the deeper question of where our *spiritual tents* might be pitched; of where our home and identity is rooted.

We don't know exactly who the intended recipients of this letter were, but it's believed that they were among the second generation of Christian believers, offset from the common mind of their society because of their acceptance of Jesus Christ. Separateness is a tough climate; many were not coping. Some had jacked the faith in, while others teetered on the edge of apostasy, of giving it all up. What we hear in this letter, however, is a call to steadfastness; the encouragement to hang on in there.

Holy Week is a necessary epoch for us because in these seven days from Palm Sunday to Easter Day, time and space become ever more compressed so that we are able to see in the passion events - the whole of human life scaled down: creation to consummation, Genesis to Revelation, Olivet to Calvary, earth to heaven. Everything is purposive in the Kingdom of God. We've recently heard again that '[He] hates nothing that [he] has made,' and therefore we, as the recipients of his making and completion need to discover once more what it is to walk on the path of sacrificial acceptance, bearing crosses of ill weight and complex difficulty. We too are reminded by this week to rise up and follow in spite of ourselves.

Mary is a fine example of this in the story from John's Gospel. She who has witnessed her four-day dead brother walk out of his grave upholds her faith in Jesus' identity as she anoints and wipes his feet in a loving embrace of the Passover which is to come. When Mary does this, she is aligning herself with Jesus in his forthcoming death and resurrection. She knows she 'will not always have [him],' and here is the preparation for and foreshadowing of that time. Jesus praises Mary because she recognises the place where her salvation rests. Not in a temple of human design and engineering, but in the person Son of God who will be betrayed and given up into the hands of sinners. Mary's faith enables her to share the impending cross with her Lord despite the uncertainty of what is to come. In her frailty and bereavement, she chooses to pitch her tent and so stake her claim; she pitches up in Jesus, the new and perfect lodging of Godself. The coming week for her will be a vulnerable and testing time, but one that will prove enduring beyond all measure for the greater safety and hope it offers in God's self-offering of Godself to bring the whole cosmos into true and immutable relationship.

Uncertainty and doubt beset all of us much of the time. It is not difficult to see why early Christian believers struggled to get and keep this new way of following and knowing God. Many of them were beginning revert to the safety of the Jewish temple with its familiar customs and practices, and we observe that they were falling short of all offered by the new covenant of the Paschal Victim.

As we set out together to walk in the way of suffering during this Holy Week, we too do so with many conflicts, unanswered questions doubts. 'Fightings within and fears without,' as Charlotte Elliot's hymn puts it. But the same hymn also teaches that our 'one plea' in God is to come to him, 'just as we are.' Thus when Mary lavishes expensive perfume at Jesus' feet, he honours, welcomes and accepts her gift. A gift given by a sister in mourning, whose potent grief gives way to her own expression of the love she has received from the heart and hands – the venerable and vulnerable loving hands of the Almighty.

This week will see that love proclaimed to the world afresh, as our incarnate God makes of himself the living temple for our habitation and praise. It will well be awkward for us, if not ignominious: Holy Week is a thin place where earth and heaven can't but touch. And I might not like it: I don't want to be uncomfortable; I can't cope with touch with the venerable and vulnerable nature and form of the living God. What about you? Are you a Mrs Beamish, too? "Take your hands off me; this is the C of E."

Well, perhaps Holy Week has a message for you. If we can watch in our frailty alongside Mary, awaiting and watching for the 'good things' that will come through the blood of the eternal covenant, then we shall know with her and the holy men and women of every age, what it is to be truly, lastingly encamped in the new and perfect tent of the living Christ, as reoriented, gloriously resurrected citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Where is your spiritual tent pitched? I wonder whether it catches the Son?

AMEN