

St Luke's in the City

5th Sunday in Lent

25 March 2007

Celebrating at the CROSSroads

Dear Friends,

This morning we are a divided community! A significant number of us are making a silent retreat at Hanmer Springs, based at the Church of the Epiphany. I am delighted that there are 17 retreatants. And I am grateful to The Reverend Graeme Nicholas for being the presider and preacher at St Luke's this morning. Those at St Luke's today will notice being a somewhat smaller company – the liturgy is simpler accordingly. Those at the Church of the Epiphany will be swelling the numbers of the Hanmer faithful. Let us pray for each other as we enter into this final week of Lent - next Sunday we enter the Great Holy Week of the Christian year.

I have been encouraging us to take Holy Week seriously, and last week wrote about the Passion Sunday liturgy. Today I want to say some things about the Holy Thursday and Good Friday liturgies. On Holy Thursday the Easter Triduum begins – with the washing of feet. “Unless I wash you, you have no part with me,” Jesus tells the disciples. The saying holds true. Yet for some of us this is very difficult. This is a humbling, and possibly a disturbing, experience. Our pride and shame is exposed. But our common vocation as Christ's servants is also called forth. At the centre of Christian faith is not an instruction to ‘Believe this’ – rather we are commanded “Do this...” Will you do this with us? We follow Christ the King, a king of doing, a king who kneels before us with bowl and towel, touching that part of our bodies most despised. The liturgy is deliberately bodily and sensual – the caress of feet, the sweet smell of oil, the taste of bread and wine, the visual shift from bright light into darkness. The liturgy does not end, but leaves us with the darkness of a long all-night vigil of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, until Good Friday's liturgy of the Cross.

Good Friday seems to evoke in some avoidance, in others an obsession with blood and gore and violence - more like ‘Guilty Friday’! Mel Gibson's film is perhaps the best-known recent exponent of this unhealthy fixation. Yet in authentic Christian memory this is the Great and Good Friday. We come to church not to tear ourselves apart, nor yet to pity Jesus. We gather not to weep – “Weep not for me” - but to celebrate the greatness of God's love in the most paradoxical action any religion knows. We look into the abyss of human sin and failure, recognizing the cross planted outside Jerusalem as one and the same with the ever-present crosses of this and every age. But more than this, we look into the very heart of God's amazing love, meeting fear and hate head on. In common prayer and liturgical action, our gaze remains steadfastly fixed on God's unswerving faithfulness subverting our inconstancy, God's eastering demolishing all our graveyards, God's deathless energy bursting open the safety of our tombs. We come to touch wood, and we do so gladly, for the cross belongs not only to the victim but to the victor. Here is the guarantee that God never abandons us, never remains angry, never resorts to revenge, never returns evil for evil. Come with us to the cross; embrace the tree of life.

With my love, David