

The upside down world of Jesus

A sermon preached by Revd Viv Bridges on the fourth Sunday of Easter, 17 April 2016.

Readings: Acts 9.36-43, Revelation 7.9-17, John 10.22-30

Our readings today include one of the phrases that has always fascinated me - from Revelation (7.14); 'these around the throne are they who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb!'

Robes made white/clean in something that we don't just associate with the colour red but with dirtiness, unclean-ness. If we get blood on ourselves or on our clothes we immediately want to wash it off - afraid of infection, food poisoning. So it is just one of the many puzzles and paradoxes that life in Jesus Christ involves, and that we find mentioned so often in the New Testament.

Jesus seems to turn normal things of the world upside down. He told us that in order to gain life, we must be prepared to lose it, "*He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses for my sake will find it*", "*Take up your cross daily, and follow me.*" In other words, in order to come to true life, rather than just existing, we have to give up our lives into God's hands.

Jesus told us to "*Love those that hate you and pray for those that despitefully use you.*" "*Count it all joy when men revile and persecute you, for so they persecuted the prophets that were before you.*" And "*If a man strikes you on one check, turn to him the other check, also.*"

Jesus turned upside down the world's idea of leadership. He told us that a leader, a master, must be a servant. "*Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all,*" "*the first shall be last and the last first*". So we talk of the servant King.

Today we heard Jesus, the lamb of God, talking about himself as a shepherd - the roles of 'cared for' and 'carer' reversed.

The very nature of Jesus is a huge paradox - God and man, divine and human, crucified and yet still with us today; '*This bread is my body, this cup (wine) is my blood*'. And we are the many members of Christ's body, and yet are one body.

St Paul understood how Christ turned things upside down, and referred to this many times in his letters. In Philippians: '*Jesus was in the form of God, but took the form of a slave*'. Paul understood the message that Jesus gave us time and time again as the things the world considers strengths are weaknesses in God's eyes, and things the world considers weaknesses are the things that make us strong in Jesus Christ. In the first chapter of Corinthians '*God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom; God's weakness is stronger than human strength*'.

Paul realised it didn't matter what happened to his physical body. The only thing that mattered was his spiritual life in Christ. '*Living is Christ, dying is gain*'. And, of course, at the root of most of these paradoxes is the contrast between the physical and the spiritual - things of the world, and things of the spirit. Not that the physical is wrong in itself, but when we make seeking after physical pleasure, comfort, power, the most important thing in our lives it leads us away from God, and to destruction. So being forceful, demanding,

determined to have our own way are weaknesses in the life that truly matters, whereas our vulnerability, our failures, become strengths in our life in Christ.

We are still in the Easter season. This marks one of the greatest puzzles or paradoxes of all - life through the death of Jesus Christ, the life-giving Cross. Christ shed his blood for us, and by being prepared to do this, by taking our sins upon himself, he won new life for us. Revelations reminds us that, through the shedding of his blood, Jesus gives a way in which sins are not just forgiven but completely done away with - washed clean. Those saints had committed themselves totally to Jesus Christ, so any sins they had committed were washed away completely... their robes were made white.

And our reading from Acts reminds us that God is capable of bringing life even out of death... something that all the scientific research of today still fails to do. Once a human being dies, there is no way back. But there is new life in Christ. So even suffering can be turned to joy through Jesus Christ, despair turned to hope,

And all of this, of course, applies to us. The awful things we have done, that we regret, can be 'washed away'. But we need to notice that those saints washed their robes, in other words - they did their own washing! We have to cooperate with God, ask his forgiveness for the things we have done wrong, and commit ourselves to Christ, to trying to live in him.

But this is a hard lesson to take on board. Jesus spoke of his disciples as being '*in the world, but not of the world*' and this is surely what he asks of us. But living according to Christ's values instead of those of the world can be uncomfortable. We have to make difficult decisions about our wealth, any power we have, how to use the gifts God gives us, how we lead if we have roles of leadership, and we have to be prepared for persecution if we speak out against injustice and cruelty.

Believing that sorrows will be turned to joy and death to life, is hard. The times of sickness, fear, failure, despair, we go through are tough. We may often wonder how the many troubles of the world can possibly be brought to a joyful, life-affirming conclusion. And when someone we love dies or we contemplate our own death, it can be difficult to really believe that death can be turned somehow in to joy. But one of the other things that I believe Jesus turns upside down is any feeling that our doubts and uncertainties are in anyway sinful. If anyone says they have no doubts about anything in our Christian life they probably don't really know themselves properly, or are afraid of owning up.

But Christ comes to us in our weakness. St Thomas taught us that if we are prepared to own up to our doubts, they can deepen our relationship with God. And St Peter taught us that our failures do not separate us from God. He is always there ready to greet us and accept us as we are.

But we have to try to keep faith, to hold on to those things that can't be proved or explained. We have to keep trusting in God's promise of forgiveness when we feel weighed down by guilt, and we have to keep trusting in his promise of strength when we feel weighed down by sorrow and fear, defeated by the burdens of life. And we have to be totally honest with God in the things we have done wrong, in our fears, our doubts, our anger, our anguish. Then, if we offer all that we are to God, he is able to turn our weakness into strength - his strength.

So praying isn't just about sitting down and saying nice things to God, going through a particular form of prayer. Of course it can be about these things and they are important in deepening our relationship with God. But praying is also, very importantly, about opening our deepest thoughts and feelings to God. It means taking time with God, to be honest with him even about those things we might otherwise be afraid of owning up to and allowing time to listen to the Holy Spirit. This may involve opening up to someone we trust, someone through whom the Spirit may work. It may involve looking for examples of the way we feel in the Bible - and the psalms are wonderful for this. There seems to be a psalm for virtually every human emotion including joy, grief, despair, hope. And, of course, we can look to the life of Jesus himself. We can see that he experienced the things that we experience today, the temptations and pain that are a normal part of human existence, and the things that were a consequence of his refusal to live according to the values of the world. And what we see is that he transformed even the most terrible things that may happen in life.

If we can trust in Jesus' promises and commit ourselves to his upside down values, we shall find sins washed away, light in darkness, joy in sorrow, hope in despair, and even life through death.

Amen