

## HOLY WEEK SERVICES 2012

### Monday 2nd April – 1 John 3:1-6: “How Deep The Father’s Love For Us”

The NIV translation opens chapter 3 with these words *‘See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!’*

We are sometimes ambivalent about treatment that is ‘lavish’ for example when we talk of ‘lavish hospitality’ we are describing something that is a bit ‘over the top’ and too rich for our blood. Here John is expressing the almost inexpressible – the lavishness of God in making us his children.

We all draw characteristics from our parents whether we are aware of it or not and people often look at us and see in us echoes of our parents’ mannerisms, physical attributes, attitudes. This can be hard to hear. We might not like to be seen as a ‘chip off the old block’ especially if we dislike or disapprove of those to whom we are being compared.

John tells us that we can have a parent better than any other. In chapter 3 of John’s gospel we hear Jesus explaining to Nicodemus that to be saved he must be ‘born again’ of the spirit. To be a true follower of Christ requires us all to be reborn – every Christian is a born again Christian, despite the attempts of some branches of the faith to reserve this claim as peculiar to their sect or grouping.

When we are reborn we should begin to exhibit the characteristics of our supreme Parent. As children of God we need to grow and mature as Christians all through our lives. This process of growth starts with the transformation in our hearts and minds that occurs when we truly grasp the **enormity of what God has done for us**. His sinless Son, Jesus, took on himself our sin so that we could experience the glorious freedom from sin’s bondage; the glorious freedom to live in Jesus Christ and to have him live in us; a glorious freedom that can **only** be achieved through Jesus Christ and not by any efforts we make ourselves.

This transforming rebirth, to be genuine, must result in changed lives. *‘No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.’*

That is not to say we will never again go down the wrong path or never again give in to temptation. But we will now strive to live by different standards and pursue different goals – those of Jesus and not the world’s. Just as it is hard to bear when we know we have let down our earthly parents or someone we love, it will become intolerable for us to disappoint our heavenly Father the more we come to appreciate the depth of his love for us.

During this Holy Week if any of us are in any doubt that we have experienced the Father’s love or if we have failed to claim it for ourselves, then this is the time to change - to be reborn.

### Tuesday 3rd April - John 19: 23-27: " Behold The Man Upon The Cross"

When considering the whole Easter story we tend to think more about the events leading up to the crucifixion and those after the resurrection. We tend not to focus quite so often on the human drama being worked out before us that is reported in this short passage from John’s gospel. We sometimes forget to focus on **the man upon the cross**.

This is an eye witness account by John, one of only a handful of individuals, friends and family of Jesus, who remained near him during the agony of his crucifixion and eventual death. As human beings we can imagine the shock, the sadness, the pain that these supporters of Jesus would be feeling. How things had changed in so short a time! A few days after being been fêted and welcomed with jubilation by crowds of people Jesus is betrayed, deserted, arrested, slandered, tortured and hung on a cross to die. Despite the physical and mental agony he is experiencing, Jesus is all compassion. Seeing his mother’s anguish at the

foot of the cross he concerns himself with her welfare and gives her into John's care.

What a contrast with the behaviour of the soldiers who have just crucified him! To them Jesus is just another crucifixion. They seem to operate with such detachment, concerned only with dividing the spoils among themselves unaware that they are fulfilling Scriptures foretold a thousand years before in Psalm 22 *"Dogs surround me, a pack of villains encircles me; they pierce my hands and my feet. All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment."*

These soldiers gambling over the distribution of his clothes are among the last things Jesus sees as he drifts in and out of consciousness towards death. What a despicable treatment of the Saviour of the world! Vilified, humiliated, abused and then disregarded as even less than human.

Who could have imagined that this sordid day would mark the start of the most incredible transformation of human society that the world would ever see? The most momentous thing is that **as Jesus dies the power of sin dies with him**. The horror of the manner and circumstances of Jesus' death shows us how foul sin really is. Were it not so then Jesus would not have had to endure such a horrible death. As Jesus dies our joy lies in recognising that his death is purchasing our salvation. So let us relinquish our sin and lay its burden on the cross of Jesus Christ.

### **Wednesday 4th April 2012 - Galatians 6:11-18 : "I Will Not Boast In Anything"**

So far during this Holy Week we have considered two aspects of the Easter events that reveal the nature of God. On Monday we looked at the Fatherhood of God and the magnitude of his generosity towards his people in making us his children. Then on Tuesday we thought about the wholly human nature that Jesus, the wholly divine and sinless Son of God, was willing to take on and the suffering he was willing to endure for our salvation.

We should recognise, however, that these two ideas can be misinterpreted by some who create a theology which presents God as only good and kind and generous. They fail to include or accept that God can also challenge, judge and condemn. They create God in their own image characterising him simply as all mercy and grace. This Kenneth describes as 'deist' rather than 'Christian' thinking. Such deists believe in God as they want him to be revealed rather than as how he is actually revealed in Scriptures. Hence we find 75% of census respondents in Scotland claiming to be Christians when they might more accurately be called deists.

It is crucial that we do not focus only on the man who is Jesus. There is danger in focusing on Jesus as a superman, a superhuman archetype, a prime example of a good man whom we should try and emulate. To see Jesus merely as 'the perfect man' is a humanist rather than a Christian view.

In this letter to the Galatian church Paul deals with one of the burning issues of the early church, circumcision. If he had not addressed it the uniqueness of Jesus would have been lost. Paul cuts right through the arguments for and against retaining former Jewish practices and declares that all these outward things and symbols are of no fundamental importance. But 'what counts is a new creation'.

Circumcision is not an issue for us today but we too can get diverted by issues that are not germane to the purpose of the church. For example, it does not matter how we organise services or whether we sing traditional or modern hymns. What counts is how we are embracing a close relationship with the risen Lord and what we are doing to spread the gospel.

When ministers are invited to perform chaplaincy duties in outside institutions such as schools or colleges people often express interest in ministry, they are quite happy to hear stories from the Bible and are even admiring of Jesus. However they frequently request that the minister's proposed talk steers clear of the crucifixion. Paul's message is unequivocal – *'May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ'*. How many of us can echo Paul's words? If we are being honest, maybe not many of us. The cross is embarrassing and we can easily fall into the bad habit of commending Christianity in all the wrong way. How often do we hear people (including ministers) in the church describing the church's purpose as 'education' or 'social care'. The church is not just an institution for doing good. **Doing good does not save us from sin.** *'What counts is a new creation'* says Paul and that is made possible by the cross and is only achieved at the cross.

Last night we thought about the handful of Jesus' supporters who remained with him to the end. Golgotha was surrounded by people who looked on as Jesus spoke and later died but they all left after the crucifixion to go back to the same lives they had led before, untouched, unchanged and unwilling to be reborn!

We all must come to the cross and be reborn. There we can nail everything to the cross – sin, failure, despair, doubt as well as aspirations, hopes, dreams. We can leave them all in the hands of the man who stilled the waters who now sits enthroned in heaven and before whom every knee shall bow and whom every tongue shall confess as Lord.

As we break bread at tomorrow's communion service let us do so as people who, like Paul, will say 'May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ' because we are a new creation. If we have not been able to say it before may God's word so burn in our hearts that we can say it and mean it from now on.

## EASTER SUNDAY 2012

Evening Service Luke 24: 13-35 - On the road to Emmaus

In this familiar story about Cleopas and a companion walking back to Emmaus we see described an almost unique encounter with Jesus. It is the third day since the crucifixion and these two followers of Jesus are returning home from Jerusalem feeling dejected and discouraged after Jesus' ignominious death on a cross like a common criminal. They are talking over the recent events and no doubt trying to understand what had happened – how the week before, that had seen Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, could have so quickly become Jesus' final week on earth. Was this end of his ministry the end of all their hopes?

As Jesus appears and talks to them Cleopas, astounded that this 'stranger' seems to have heard nothing of recent events, gives a full explanation of what has occurred. Cleopas and his companion do not know quite what to make of reports that Jesus may in fact be alive. Jesus responds with an exclamation that he has often used when faced with the failure of his hearers to grasp the truth : *'How foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!'* This is a truthful observation by Jesus rather than a disparaging put-down. He knows how quickly we forget and how our doubts and fears can hamper our search for the truth. So rather than walk away in disgust at this fresh example of human frailty Jesus sets about teaching the two men. In Old Testament terms nothing that had happened to Jesus should have been a surprise to Cleopas and the other followers – it was all foretold, then fulfilled in Jesus' life and sacrifice and will be completed in his second coming.

Small wonder that Cleopas urges Jesus to stay with them when they reach their destination. These two are not numbered among the twelve apostles so they have probably never been physically so close to Jesus nor have they ever before enjoyed and been enlightened by such clear and authoritative teaching. Only when they take the bread Jesus hands to them do they actually recognise who he is, no doubt from the marks where the nails have pierced his palms, whereupon Jesus disappears from their sight.

What a bitter-sweet moment that must have been for Cleopas and his friend! They are overjoyed that Jesus is indeed alive and at that same moment they are sorry that he has left their presence. Nevertheless this

encounter has put new heart into them both and they immediately get up to rush back the seven miles to Jerusalem to tell everyone else the good news. Eager to be the first with the story, they discover that Jesus has been there ahead of them.

Doesn't this call to mind sublime moments we too have experienced perhaps at a special service or in other private situations when we have been aware of the incomparable sweetness of God's presence? Try as we might to recreate the blessing for ourselves we discover it is not up to us but is a gift bestowed by God with his own wise timing.

We all have a tendency to imagine that when Jesus speaks he is speaking only to us individually. But in truth he is speaking and ministering to billions of people across the world all the time.

Some ask 'What if Jesus had stayed around a bit longer on earth?' But how many more could Jesus have reached within the constraints of an earthly ministry compared with the accessibility the world has now been given, through the Holy Spirit, to commune with Jesus anytime, anywhere? This is the wonder of what God has done. Cleopas and his companion enjoyed a privilege not given to many when Jesus walked the earth. Now, with the Spirit's help, we too can enjoy a close, personal relationship with Jesus. What a glorious Saviour – the man who is God!