**EASTER DAY 2018**

The first day of Lent, Ash Wednesday, was Valentine’s Day and today, as we end the season with relief and rejoicing, is April the first. Announcing on April Fool’s Day that Jesus is alive, having been crucified, died, and buried, feels like asking for trouble. We celebrate today the most improbable of turnarounds. The embarrassment of Jesus, claimed as leader and saviour, dying ignominiously on a cross between common thieves is superseded by the even more ridiculous news that the tomb is empty and he lives. It must have seemed ridiculous, reckless and indeed foolish and we can imagine resulted in sceptical mirth and derision.

We are here today to proclaim that God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom. That has been changing lives and our world down the centuries, and it is changing them today. The impact is both personal and wide ranging.

Over Holy Week, as Dean David preached for the congregations here in his final weeks before retirement, I have been thinking of the impact of Jesus’ betrayal, condemnation, suffering, crucifixion and resurrection on me and on our society. This brutal narrative, and it is immensely cruel and vicious in all it inflicts on one man isolated both by his friends and by his enemies, continues to have enormous power. Millions take strength from it as they endure persecution, torture and injustice, as the Prince of Wales urged us to remember innocent people in the “barbaric grip of those who distort and misrepresent faith.” Christians, and very many others too, do their best to repay evil with good, petty-ness or small-mindedness with generosity, cruelty with compassion, in the small things as well as the bigger. The outcomes of this narrative are deeply embedded in our instinctive responses to situations and people.

Even more significantly, it is the triumph of selfless love, the courage to accept the worst that humanity can do to anyone by taking life unjustly and to be vindicated, as we confirm today that it is wrong that the weak suffer, that the poor go hungry, that the friendless are neglected, that injustice is not named and challenged. In the light of the passion and crucifixion, the Easter events compel us to say that and do something about it. It compels me to try to speak and act, this very week for instance, to address the growing modern slavery in which many in our communities are exploited, threatened and abused, and children whose learning and life chances are threatened by changes to free school meal rules.

It compels all of us, first to be touched personally by this Godly foolishness, and then to be challenged to make a difference every day. I am struck as we ponder competing pressures and try to steer our way in living the Easter message that no one is conspicuously evil in the passion narrative.

We may have our personal sense of where responsibility most lay for Jesus’ crucifixion, but sectional, inherited or prejudiced considerations aside, it is impossible to blame alone either weak Pilate, or disappointed Judas, or scared disciples, or the determined Jewish leaders. The Gospels show us all of them with understanding of their dilemmas. Yet when we see the interlocking and overlapping agendas of these people, we see injustice as the outcome until this morning.

In St John’s Gospel, from which we read, the whole narrative turns on just one word. In the middle of the mystery, the confusion, the uncertainty of the first Easter morning, one word changes everything, one word spoken by the risen Jesus that opens the door into a whole new world of possibility. That word is the name, the name of a dear friend: ‘Mary’.

John records that Mary Magdalene makes her way down to the tomb, early in the morning. John tells us that she had stood close by when Jesus was crucified, and now she returns to the tomb as early as time allows. It was still dark, John’s way of reminding us that while we might know what’s about to happen, we have to remember that nobody was prepared for what came next. And so as Mary finds the tomb stone rolled away, it is unsurprising that in shock she goes to find other friends of Jesus, to tell them that the tomb is empty, probably with the assumption that it has been robbed.

She finds Simon Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved, that mysterious figure thought by some to be the Gospel writer himself. But Lazarus is introduced in the Gospel described to Jesus as the one ‘whom you love’, and twice we are reminded of Jesus’s love for Lazarus. If this beloved disciple is Lazarus then we can imagine the race to the tomb, the beloved disciple arriving first but initially reluctant to return to that place of death from which Jesus brought him. Peter, always the bold one goes straight in when he catches up, and sees the emptiness of the tomb, save the grave clothes folded up where the body had been. If this is Lazarus then perhaps his belief derives from his own experience; he has been raised from the dead, so perhaps something like this has happened to Jesus.

The others leave Mary alone, finally free to weep in deeper sorrow, for Jesus had first been taken away by death and now his body has been taken away too. She looks again and perceives in the growing light that there are two angels, who ask her why she weeps. Her response confirms that she believes Jesus to have been stolen away, but not to life, and as she turns and sees Jesus she is as yet unable to recognize him, the first fruits of God’s new creation, and a strange new kind of life breaking into the darkness of this world. But she still does not know him, and asks him instead where Jesus has been taken.

Jesus responds, simply be speaking her name, ‘Mary’, and that is the moment she knows that it is him. It is the uttering of a friend’s name, the most personal form of all language, that reveals the risen Jesus. In the speaking of that name there is the indication of a friendship that has not been broken by death after all, of a sense of continuity in this strange irruption of life from death. It says that the same hope that Mary had known in the life of Christ continues anew, as personal and as life-giving as before.

The good news of Easter is discovered in the hearing of one word: Mary, my name, your name, from the mouth of Jesus. Listen for that word today and every day. The resurrection of Jesus means new life, for all creation, for the people of God, and for you. It means reconciliation with the one who loved Lazarus, Peter, and Mary, and whose love for you is unwavering, undaunted by the grave, and always there, however dark the morning.