

Acting it out

‘Words, words, words, I’m so sick of words. I get words all day through, first from him, now from you. Is that all you blighters can do?’ sings Eliza in My Fair Lady. And it has to be said that she could just as reasonably be saying it to the Church as to Freddy Eynsford-Hill. We are obsessed with words, it seems. So it is good when we managed to take her advice in the song, and get to doing things which ‘Show me!’

We start today with a good example of that as we walk from the square to church with a donkey, and palms. Of course it was a million miles from what happened in Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday, but having a donkey, having palm leaves and palm crosses begins to get us in touch with the events much much more than words ever could. Actions speak louder than words is a proverb that really reflects the truth.

So what I want to do is encourage you to go on being involved in the action this week. From Thursday through to next Sunday there is so much where we get into doing things, instead of just saying things. And if I am honest I have always been disappointed at the number of members of the church family who don’t join in. I am disappointed for all of us, because we miss having them – but above all I am disappointed for them – because they are missing so much. So let me just try to sell you the value of what we will be doing together, in the hope that it will inspire some more of you to take part.

On Thursday we have the service at which we re-enact Jesus’ giving us the service which we take part in week by week. Our communion service is rooted in an event in an upper room on a Thursday night, in a Passover Meal which Jesus shared with his friends, as he no doubt had each year that he was with them, and in which he would have shared with his family from his boyhood onwards. But this year it was different – he departed from the usual words and actions and when he took the bread, he told them it was his body given for them, and when he took the final cup of wine, he told them it was his blood shed for them. From then on, a new thing had begun, which we continue week after week. And we also re-enact that most extraordinary thing of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. It is a reminder that he came to serve, not to be served, and that we are called to follow his humility and service.

That takes us with the disciples to the upper room. We read that they went from there to the Garden of Gethsemane – so we strip the building of all its decorations, as we remember Jesus being in agony in the Garden, and then being arrested and taken away. We try to keep watch with Jesus as the disciples failed to do. ‘Could you not watch with me?’ he said sadly to Peter and James and John, who kept falling asleep. We need each other’s help to do better than they did. We are invited to stay watching in church for as long as we wish.

On Good Friday at 12.00 we begin the three hours of being with Christ as we keep watch with him on the Cross until the hour of his death. It is a time for meditating on a story we know so well – and giving it the sheer time we do helps us take it at its depths. Of course people can come and go during that time. But just as we watched him in the Garden through the night, so we watch him on the Cross on Friday afternoon. This year I am trying to widen our vision of the Cross by seeing what the animals who have something to say about the Cross can teach us.. Then in the liturgy at 2.00 we hear Passion story again, we listen to music, and pray together, come to touch the cross, and if we wish, to receive Communion.

Holy Saturday is the time Jesus was in the tomb. We begin our Easter celebration in the evening, with the great Easter Vigil – for me at least the most marvellous service of the whole year. We hear, in total darkness, readings which prepare us for the coming glory of Easter, and then we dispel that darkness, as Jesus dispelled it, by his rising again. The light comes back into the world – so we light a new fire outside church, and from it light the great Paschal Candle. It is carried into church with the great cry Christ is risen – He is risen indeed Alleluia!. We all light a candle from it – and the church is filled with light. The more there are there, the more that transformation from darkness to light is made obvious. Then in that light, we renew our Baptismal vows, recalling that at one time, the only time to be baptised was as Easter dawned, and that in Baptism we die and rise with Jesus. And all that leads us to the great gathering of the people of God to greet the risen Christ on Easter morning.

Maybe you have never been to the Maundy Service, or the Watch, of the Three Hours of the Great Vigil. But of course it is far from new. There is the record of a nun called Egeria who went to Jerusalem between 381-384, and described precisely the things that we will still be doing – in fact they did even more to re-enact the drama of the story than we do. Christians have found it spiritually powerful not just to listen to words, but to act out as best they may, what happened especially on those three great days leading to Easter.

Let me read you what Michael Perham, at one time Bishop of Gloucester, and Kenneth Stevenson, at one time Bishop of Portsmouth wrote about this 30 years ago:

‘Let the liturgy of the week unfold, to faithful people returning for each successive part of the drama of their salvation, and they will find themselves moved at depths they have not often known, and experience an identification of their own story with that of our Lord in his Passion that will transform both worship and Christian living throughout the year. The priest and the parish fail when they do not make this experience available in as compelling a way as possible.’

Well, our priests and parish do their best. Will you enter into the drama, as we start to do this morning by walking with our palms and our donkey? We open ourselves to the possibilities of God speaking to us in a way that we cannot begin to imagine. Will you share with us in that drama – not to observe it, but to be part of it, not spectating but acting it out. It is a glorious opportunity which I am setting before us all. Let’s grasp it with both hands.