

Canterbury Diocese Clergy Conference

Sunday

Matthew 26:26-46

Michelangelo: Good evening, your Holiness.

Pope: Evening, Michelangelo. I want to have a word with you about this painting of yours, "The Last Supper."

Michelangelo: Oh, yeah?

Pope: I'm not happy about it.

Michelangelo: Oh, dear. It took me hours.

Pope: Not happy at all. ...

Michelangelo: Oh, I know, you don't like the kangaroo?

Pope: What kangaroo?

Michelangelo: No problem, I'll paint him out.

Pope: I never saw a kangaroo!

Michelangelo: Uuh ... he's right in the back. I'll paint him out! No sweat, I'll make him into a disciple.

Pope: Aah. ... That's the problem.

Michelangelo: What is?

Pope: The disciples. There are twenty-eight of them.

Michelangelo: Oh, well, another one will never matter, I'll make the kangaroo into another one.

Pope: No, that's not the point.

Michelangelo: All right. Well, I'll lose the kangaroo. Be honest, I wasn't perfectly happy with it.

Pope: That's not the point. There are twenty-eight disciples!

Michelangelo: Too many?

Pope: Well, of course it's too many! ...

Michelangelo: Well, maybe some of their friends came by, you know?

Pope: Look! There were just twelve disciples and our Lord at the last supper. The Bible clearly says so.

Michelangelo: No friends?

Pope: No friends.

Michelangelo: Waiters?

Pope: No.

Michelangelo: Cabaret?

Pope: No! ...

Michelangelo: I've got it! I've got it! We'll call it "The Last But One Supper"!

Pope: What?

Michelangelo: Well there must have been one, if there was a last supper there must have been a one before that, so this, is the "Penultimate Supper"! The Bible doesn't say how many people were there now, does it?

Pope: No, but...

Michelangelo: Well there you are, then!

Pope: Look! The last supper is a significant event in the life of our Lord, the penultimate supper was not! Even if they had a conjurer and a mariachi band. Now, a last supper I commissioned from you, and a last supper I want! With twelve disciples and one Christ!

Michelangelo: One?!

Pope: Yes one! Now will you please tell me what in God's name possessed you to paint this with three Christs in it?

Michelangelo: It works, mate! ... The fat one balances the two skinny ones.

Pope: There was only one Redeemer!

Michelangelo: Ah, I know that, we all know that, what about a bit of artistic license?

Pope: Well one Messiah is what I want!

Michelangelo: I'll tell you what you want, mate! You want a bloody photographer! That's you want. Not a creative artist.

Pope: I'll tell you what I want! I want a last supper with one Christ, twelve disciples, no kangaroos, no trampoline acts, by Thursday lunch, or you don't get paid!

We shall shortly be hearing the story of the last supper again, and entering into it again. Often, I suspect, we see the sacrament as a way of entering in to the past event of the Cross, and that is of vital importance. What I want to do first of all this morning, however, is to offer another dimension of what the sacrament is about, for you to consider, and perhaps to take with you to the Eucharist.

The overall title I have been given for this mini-series of Biblical Expositions is Provisions for the Journey. So the first Provision I would like to pop into your rucksack from this passage is **sacramental anticipation**. The last supper was indeed a significant event in the life of our Lord. And one aspect of its significance which often gets overlooked is the final saying of Jesus in v. 29, 'I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in my Father's kingdom.' Because Jesus seems to see this new ritualistic meal He is giving His disciples, not only as looking back at the Cross, but also as looking forward to the coming kingdom. Even at this late hour, the Kingdom He has been proclaiming and embodying is still not here in its fullness. But the wine we drink at a Eucharist does not just stand in for the blood He was to shed the next day – it also stands in for the wine of the Kingdom fully come.

The Kingdom is not yet here in its fullness, but it is near – as Jesus taught. It is around the next corner, as Archbishop Rowan said on Friday. It is *so* on its way that we can already drink its drink. Just as the Israelites ate the produce from the promised land before they ever entered the promised land, so we can eat and drink the bread and wine of the coming kingdom before it fully arrives.

The Eucharist thus orientates us towards the future. That is where we are headed – to God's put-right world. That's where we belong. I think it was the Russian dissident poet Irena Ratushinskaya who, when she was deprived of her Soviet citizenship and was living in America, was asked what she now regarded as home – and she replied, 'The Eucharist is my homeland.' We belong, not in some other world, but in this world healed. This world put right. Our home is the coming kingdom. That's why we never feel completely settled in the way things are now. We never feel entirely at home in the present dispensation. As the Greek Orthodox theologian, John Zizioulas, puts it, our roots are less

in the past, with all its ambiguities and compromises and griefs, than in the healed future. And the wine of the Eucharist links us to that future. It gives us a little taste of home.

The second piece of equipment for the journey is **Liturgical Connectedness**. v. 30: ‘When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.’

It seems as if there was a set hymn for the end of a Passover celebration (if that’s what this was) – probably one of the psalms. One of the good things about having set hymns, set words, set actions to perform on particular occasions is of course that it connects us to other people singing the same songs, saying the same words, performing the same actions. It gives us some shared experience. It binds us in to a community of people who are celebrating together. Everyone will come with different motivations, in different frames of mind, at different stages of life, and we will each experience the celebration in a unique way, but, because of the shared words and shared acts, there will be overlap in our experience. Common words and common actions give us some sort of common life. Some sort of community. Liturgy thus helps to give us companions on the journey – and not just contemporary companions, but companions from different ages who have used the same words and performed the same actions.

And the other great thing about set words and set actions is that it takes the pressure off you. Where there are no set words or actions, the onus is on you to generate the right forms, to think the right thoughts, to feel the right emotions. There are times when spontaneous prayer and worship are stimulating and creative and natural, and liberating. But there are also times when we don’t have the energy or inner resources or even perhaps the will, or perhaps even the faith to put in that much effort. To use Tom Wright’s analogy, there are times, particularly when we are doubting or in pain, when we don’t have the strength to swim, and it is then that liturgy, like a river, is able to carry us.

Liturgical connectedness.

The third provision I suggest we pack and take with us is **self-knowledge**.

There’s a wonderful Peter Cook and Dudley Moore sketch in which Dudley interviews Sir Arthur Strieve-Greebling, one of the very few people in the world, if not the only person in the world, to have spent the major part of his life under water, attempting to teach ravens to fly.

Dud: Sir Arthur, is it difficult to get ravens to fly under water?

Pete: Well, I think the word ‘difficult’ is an awfully good one here. Yes, it’s, er ... it’s well nigh impossible. I think the trouble is, you see, God in His infinite wisdom and mercy, designed these creatures to fly through the air rather than through the watery

substances. Hence their enormous difficulty, as you say, difficulty, in beating their tiny wings against the water. It's a disastrous experience for them.

Dud: I suppose they drown, do they?

Pete: it's curtains for them, Yes. We're knee-deep in feathers off that part of the coast.

Dud: Sir Arthur, have you ever managed to get a raven to fly under water?

Pete: No. Not at all. Not a single success in the whole forty years of training.

Dud: Rather a miserable failure, your whole life then, I suppose.

Pete: My life has been a miserable failure, yes.

Well, you can't fault Sir Arthur's self-knowledge there. You can fault Peter's, however: 'Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you. Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.'

It is important to be aware of our own fallibility. It is healthy to have no illusions about our own strength. It is good to be reticent about our own stability – be it spiritual, emotional, moral or relational. 'So,' says St. Paul, 'if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall' (1 Cor 10:12).

It seems to me to be important pastorally to build some robust recognition of our frailty into the very language we use. Otherwise, the crashes when they come will be the more severe. Some modern songs encourage us to assert confidently that 'I will seek you all of my days: I will follow all of your ways.' And I'm afraid, being the awkward, bolshy, difficult type, I tend inwardly to translate it into a prayer rather than a statement: 'Help me seek you all of my days, Help me follow all of your ways.' For if Peter and the others failed, I cannot guarantee that I will not.

Self-knowledge.

The fourth candidate for inclusion in the rucksack from this episode is **Emotional Interdependence**.

It is an old saying that 'A friend in need is a pain indeed.' But it is not one that Jesus heeded. He was unashamed to ask for the company of His closest friends that night of all nights. This is not a journey that He wanted to go through by Himself. He wanted their company and He needed their support.

Nowhere that I know of is this given more moving expression than in C S Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. (There was a cartoon in *Private Eye* some years ago, of a tall queen wearing a crown, and a lion, looking at a complicated diagram with

puzzled expressions on their faces. And the caption was ‘The Lion, the Witch and the Ikea Wardrobe’.) This is the Narnian equivalent of the Gethsemane story.

Then Susan suddenly caught Lucy’s arm and said, ‘Look!’ On the far side of the camping ground, just where the trees began, they saw the lion slowly walking away from them into the wood. Without a word they both followed him. He led them up the steep slope, out of the river valley, and then slightly to the right, apparently by the very same route which they had used that afternoon in coming from the hill of the stone table. On and on he led them, into the dark shadows and out into pale moonlight, getting their feet wet with the heavy dew. He looked somehow different from the Aslan they knew. His tail and his head hung low and he walked slowly as if he were very, very tired. Then, when they were crossing a wide open place where there were no shadows for them to hide in, he stopped and looked round. It was no good trying to run away so they came towards him. When they were closer he said, ‘Oh children, children, why are you following me?’ ‘We couldn’t sleep’, said Lucy and then felt sure that she need say no more, and that Aslan knew all that they had been thinking. ‘Please may we come with you wherever you are going?’ said Susan. ‘Well’ – said Aslan, and seemed to be thinking. Then he said, ‘I should be glad of company tonight. Yes, you may come if you will promise to stop when I tell you, then after that leave me to go on alone.’ But how slowly he walked! And his great royal head drooped so that his nose nearly touched the grass. Presently, he stumbled and gave a low moan. ‘Aslan, dear Aslan,’ said Lucy, ‘what is wrong? Can’t you tell us?’ ‘Are you ill, dear Aslan?’ asked Susan. ‘No, no,’ said Aslan, ‘I am sad and lonely. Lay your hands on my mane so that I can feel you are there and let us walk like that.’

There *is* a kind of neediness that is destructive, and a kind of emotional dependence that is unhealthy. But to feel the need for company, for friendship, for support, for human warmth – this is simply part of what it is to be a human being, and Jesus is unashamed to ask for it. No conception of humanity that is based upon a triune God could possibly promote an individual approach to living, or a self-contained, self-sufficient, independent ideal for human living.

Those we look to for our support will not be perfect, any more than Peter, James and John were, or any more than we will be in turn to those who look to us. The robust recognition of our human frailties applies here too. Sometimes the person we turn to will not be able to help. They may have too many other demands upon them – they are only finite. They may find it too close to their own pain to be able to cope with it – they are broken too. But don’t deny your need for support or its legitimacy. We are made for emotional interdependence.

The fifth provision for the rucksack is **a full emotional range**.

I'm sorry to inflict on you another joke of almost Christmas-cracker-like cringeworthiness, but Why don't Buddhists Hoover in the corners of their rooms? Because they have no attachments.

Jesus did not aim for an attachment-free, passionless, calm emotional life. In this passage, he began to be grieved and agitated. He told his companions that 'I am deeply grieved, even to death.' He throws Himself down on the ground in His distress. Luke tells us that He sweated blood. He is filled with compassion at the sight of the crowds. He loves the rich young ruler who walks away. He is angry at what He sees as hypocrisy. He snorts in spirit and breaks down in tears at the tomb of His friend.

He has a full emotional range. It's just that the emotions are appropriate to the situations He is confronting.

We need to allow ourselves the same freedom, the same full range. Some of us have had it drilled into us that it is childish to cry, and thereby deny ourselves the appropriate response to grief and give it no healthy forms of expression. Some of us have been afraid to give any expression to our anger, and so have driven it underground, only for it to resurface later as depression. Some of us have never received much love and so find it hard to give or to feel love in our turn.

Jesus expresses His sorrow, expresses His anger, expresses His love. He knows what it is that He is feeling, and He is free enough to tell others: 'I am deeply grieved.'

It seems to me that the full emotional range with which Jesus operates encourages the same in us, both in our personal lives, and in our public worship. You see many posters carrying the verse, 'Be still and know that I am God', but not many that say, 'Jesus began to be grieved and agitated'. Stillness is a hugely important colour on the palate – I don't have enough of it on mine. But it is only one band of the full emotional spectrum, and, if we restrain ourselves to one band, if we think we need to try and make ourselves still when internally we are raging or grieving, we will set up a mismatch between our psychology and our spirituality, with the danger that the latter will strike us as fundamentally unreal.

Any single band of the emotional spectrum will strike us as unreal at some point – be it stillness (which is the base font of some traditions), exuberance (which is the base font of the Tigger Tradition) or solemnity (which is the emotional band to which Eeyores gravitate). At some point, the emotion you go to church with is bound to grate with the predominant emotion you encounter there, because of the huge range of emotional responses life will induce within us. That is surely inevitable, but those who are responsible for the leading of public worship can help limit these limitations by attempting to provide (with their choice of readings, music and atmosphere) as broad an emotional canvas as possible. The Church calendar should help here.

We need to allow ourselves – and others - a full emotional range.

And the last of the provisions from this passage is an **Acknowledgement of God**.

‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want’ (v.39).

Notice again how Jesus is honest about His own feelings, desires, longings. He does not pretend that He is enthusiastic about the way He sees lying before Him. He doesn’t want to do it. He doesn’t want to go through with it. Everything in Him shrinks from it. As a human being, He has all the instincts for self-preservation that He inherits from our common evolutionary past, all the hopes each of us has for a continuing personal contribution and for continuing personal relationships. There is no repression or denial of His own desires.

And yet, there is a refusal to absolutise those perfectly legitimate desires, a refusal to insist upon them. He expresses His own longings but makes them secondary. Having taught His disciples to pray to the Father, ‘Your will be done’, He comes through the crucible and is able to pray that Himself.

In *The Screwtape Letters*, Screwtape, a senior devil, tells his young nephew:

Do not be deceived, Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a human being, not longer desiring but still intending to do our Enemy’s will, looks round upon a world from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why He has been abandoned – and still obeys.

(That was the passage that made me go ahead and be ordained when everything in me was rebelling against the idea and against God, so it’s got a lot to answer for!) But how does Screwtape *know* that their cause is never more in danger than when someone does not want to do God’s will but does it? He knows it from this story. He knows it from Gethsemane and from Golgotha.

If we find every deep place within us rebelling against doing what we sense to be right, not only is it not wrong to long for a different way, to long for this cup to pass from us. It may also be the threshold of deep fruitfulness – if we will relativise our own agenda, and let God be God.