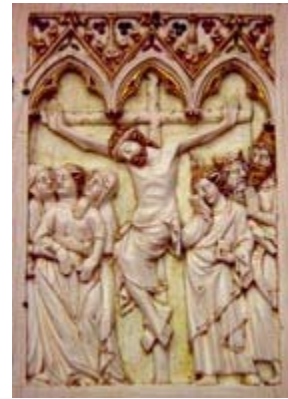


ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 28 MARCH 2010
Mr Robert Sanderson



“Journeying with Jesus: Stops on the Way”

The service this morning is structured as a journey through the events of Holy Week from the standpoint of the disciples. I suggested at the beginning that we could make it our journey, too. And that is what I want to do now because the events of this week seriously challenge our own religious journey. I want to make some stops, examine our path and maybe jettison some baggage on the way.

STOP 1 -- On the mountain top

We ascend the mountain, and from our lofty viewpoint sit down and contemplate the words of the last chorale.

The language of the first verse of *‘It is finished’* is fascinating.

*It is finished! Christ has known
All the life of men wayfaring.
Human joys and sorrows sharing
Making human needs his own.*

*Lord, in us your life renewing,
Lead us where your feet have trod,
Till, the way of truth pursuing,
Human souls find rest in God.*

The first half has Christ journeying (wayfaring) with us on the way. The second half is about following the path laid down. We notice a split between the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus as Marcus Borg calls them.

It occurs to us that these two different ways of seeing the journey might appeal to different groups of people. Maybe some see their journey as a wandering one which may deviate and change and each event requiring a new assessment. Maybe for others, the journey is mapped out and deviations are counter-productive. Or, to put it another way, for some, the journey is to be savoured. For others, the ultimate goal is to be attained. Of course life isn't as black and white as that. There is a whole spectrum in between. Nevertheless, the thought is there that many people see themselves as coming down on one side or the other.

But wait, there is much more to this question than meets the eye. What we are talking about here is religion after all. The author of the hymn no doubt wants to draw the distinction between the human and the divine. But if we look at it more closely, we see that the two halves of this verse reflect two different ways of *imagining God*. The first is of a God that is part of us and intimately sharing our journey in all our ups and downs. This is what Michael Morwood calls the “everywhere Presence”. The second is of a God that is distant and uncompromising, dictating what we should do. It is what Michael Morwood calls the “elsewhere God”.

The difference is profound. The first way says this life is to be lived in both its goodness and its fullness. The second says that this life should be separated from this world and is a preparation for the next life – whatever that is! That's not a flippant thought by any means. We can say that something happens after death but we cannot know what that something is. To believe otherwise is

a very dangerous notion indeed. We are familiar in today's world with those who would even slaughter others under the warped impression that it can be an entry into heaven.

We leave the mountain top pondering what kind of God we believe in.

STOP 2 -- At the bottom of the gorge

Having descended to the depths in a state of uncertainty, we turn our thoughts to Jesus.

Jesus of Nazareth was a Jewish wisdom teacher who worshipped the God of Abraham in the temple or synagogue his whole life. His teaching was always consistent with Jewish teaching and he brought new insights to those who listened to him. He had a great following of people who also worshipped in the same way. We are reminded of the first verse of our processional hymn "*All glory, praise and honour*". The author has gone to great lengths to define Jesus' Jewish heritage.

By the time John's gospel was written at the end of the first century, the Jesus communities had freely admitted Gentiles and there was friction between these groups and the Jewish communities. John used the term 'the Jews' to mean those who were antagonistic to the Jesus communities. This reflected the social situation at the end of the century. It was totally different from Jesus' time when all his followers were Jews. We think of the narrative of Mark's gospel which was written around 70 CE where no such distinction is made.

As Christianity developed, the idea that the Jews were responsible for Jesus' death became common. This resulted in Jewish persecution of many different kinds eventually culminating in the Shoah (holocaust) – the vilest event in the history of humankind.

We resume our journey in deep sorrow that two thousand years of persecution sprang from a lack of understanding of the gospel texts. As the sun sets we become acutely aware that beliefs have consequences.

STOP 3 -- In the forest

We step into a clearing where a magnificent 300 year-old red gum has been felled and left to rot. We lie down. We have the thought that this journey is a test. Could it be that God is testing us?

Was Jesus being tested when he was on the cross?

No, that cannot be right. That could only happen if there was a remote God watching and testing Jesus or us. Almost demanding we pass some strange heavenly examination. It is not God that tests us, it is simply the realities of life – sometimes because of the choices we make and sometimes because of things beyond our control.

And then it comes to us as light floods the clearing.

We see in the crucifixion a story of human failure and cruelty; of a great goodness betrayed and cut down because this man Jesus revealed a vision of how wonderful humanity could be. It assures us of the presence of God in our lives – in every experience we have. It is like the cover photo⁺ on the order of service. In that Swabian altarpiece, there are the women on one side and the magi on the other. Two groups – those who love him and those from other lands – together representing all of

humanity.(Nor is it lost on us that one group is women and the other men.) And between them is Jesus representing human suffering. Oh! What a thought. The crucifix is a continual reminder that the divine presence is always with us in the midst of humanity in all its ups and downs.

This was exactly what Jesus' teaching was all about. Helping people to experience the living presence that is all around us by making manifest the loving relationships we have with those we encounter on the journey. When we suffer and encounter the suffering of others, we touch the depth of people as in no other way. The image of Jesus on the cross points to his overwhelming faith that that presence can never be extinguished.

We sleep well.

STOP 4 -- On the beach

It is dawn and we have reached the shoreline. Our footsteps stretch behind us in the sand. The sun warms our face.

We have the thought that whatever happened on Holy Thursday, there is one thing that shines through and that is Jesus' wish that he would be remembered. That the story should be kept alive. "Remember me" is an astounding statement of faith.

A wayward thought creeps in! When talking of God, the atheists have chosen to use the term "imaginary friend" but they make the same mistake as many Christians. (Actually that's probably where the atheists got it from!) Any words we might use to describe the holy presence are but inadequate metaphors. Whatever description we come up with is hopelessly limited. Just as we can never fully describe in language everything we feel and experience, and certainly not our inner life.

Hear the endless lapping of the waves?

We resolve to start every day of our journey by reminding ourselves that God, or whatever name you use, loves us and is with us. Why? Because every time we do that we connect ourselves to the depth of our very being and even to the cosmos itself.

+ 'Crucifixion of Christ' from *Art in the Christian Tradition*; a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN