Anne Curtis 25/3/18 Palm Sunday

# ‘The Choices of Easter’

Note the sermon starts **before** the readings and introduces them. No slide at first, slide changes are highlighted in the text.

## Anne:

I believe the gospel. Everything I do, I believe in Jesus. I believe Jesus is God. I believe God is love. I believe Jesus is love in human form.

The story we are about to hear is at the heart of the gospel message. At this point in the yearly cycle of the church we gather again around this story. It’s time to listen again to the trials and tragedies of the story of how God in Jesus came to this world. We will work again to understand how an honest man, a good teacher, an inspiring leader of a small group of disciples in a place and time in history – how over the course of a few days the world could move from the public acclaim of the palms and the Hosannas to the tragedy of his death.

We and the church has insisted over the years that this story is the key. This story has been preserved, commented on in the epistles, explained as fulfilling the Old testament prophecies, written about and drawn on by numerous writers, preachers and theologians over many centuries since. We as the church insist that this story above all other historical narratives shows us the hidden love of our Creator and Redeemer.

Now, we all know that Jesus was raised from the dead on the third day after these events. And if we did not know that, then this story would be irrelevant and long forgotten. But to consider this story as it unfolded we must imagine we don’t know the final outcome yet. Then I believe we can see the love of God in human form in Jesus.

We will look at the story in several sections this morning. Susan is going to read the first part. SLIDE 1

## Susan: reads Matthew 26: 20-25, ending with the usual words from the service sheet and allowing the congregation to say their response.

## Anne:

I believe Jesus always hopes that Judas will choose the other option. I think Jesus waits and hopes, that Jesus always leaves that door wide open for the friendship to be restored. Jesus isn’t trying to control Judas.

For example Imagine I give you some gardening gloves for your birthday, we have had a few birthdays around here recently, and I give you some beautiful gardening gloves that I hope you might like, well, all well and good. But let’s suppose you don’t happen to like them and some time later you just tell me that gardening isn’t your thing, or something. And that’s all fine. I won’t get you gardening stuff again. But if I made you feel that you had to keep it all a secret and pretend to me that you loved it, then I have behaved in such a way that you’re not free to respond. Do you see where I’m going? I think we’d feel in our gut that something about that situation isn’t right. And that’s just a little example.

It is like that here, only it’s happening on a scale where the consequences are much greater in size. Judas must have that freedom to choose to reject God, otherwise God isn’t love. And God in Jesus is going to have to take that rejection, to absorb that betrayal and to deal with that hurt. This is not an easy gesture or a casual nod in the direction of allowing freedom of choice.

Jesus is sitting at table with his disciples. But one of them is a thief. The treasurer who keeps the money bag has been stealing from it (John 12:6). You cannot serve both God and money (Matt 6:24) Judas has made his choice. And now Judas the liar, who loves money more than he cares about people, has been secretly paid by the religious leaders to help them to arrest Jesus.

Unexpectedly, Jesus knows this and speaks about it. They all deny it, and Judas hiding among them also asks ‘Surely you don’t mean me, Rabbi?’ Judas unlike the others, calls Jesus ‘Rabbi’, not ‘Lord’ as the others do (compare Matt 26 verse 25 with verse 22). To the other disciples Jesus is their Lord, but to Judas he is only his Teacher. Jesus replies ‘You have said so’. The greek here just means ‘You said it’. Out of his own mouth Judas has shown his heart.

Jesus loves Judas but Judas is free to refuse to love Jesus in return. Jesus clearly cares about Judas but he will not try to control him. Jesus has chosen to live with a liar and a thief among the disciples without challenging Judas. Jesus has waited in order to discover whether Judas will choose to respond positively to the love Jesus has consistently offered him.

I believe that love has to leave that decision about the good response in the hands of the one who is being loved. Jesus waits and hopes and prays, but he doesn’t try to control the other person - even when they are betraying him. Jesus can’t force Judas to love him back. Judas has to want to follow Jesus. Judas has to decide.

Simon is going to read the second part of our gospel today. SLIDE 2

## Simon reads Matthew 26: 57-67, ending with the usual words from the service sheet and allowing the congregation to say their response.

## Anne:

After being arrested Jesus is taken before Caiaphas the high priest, the teachers of the law and the elders of the people. They have been scheming to arrest and kill Jesus (Matt 26:3) and these are the ones who are paying Judas. Now they want to bring evidence against him so they can have him put to death, but they cannot find any. Jesus is staying silent, and the high priest eventually charges him ‘under oath by the living God’, ‘Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.’

I believe Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. Because I know Jesus and I know he tells the truth about himself. But how do I know this?

This question of who Jesus is. The Son of God. The phrase appears in Jesus’ temptations, spoken by Satan ‘If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread, …’ It appeared at Jesus’ baptism, spoken by a voice from heaven ‘This is my Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased’. It is a mysterious and private thing, who you actually are, and this is Caiaphas reaching ignobly to find out who Jesus thinks he is. Your real true self identity isn’t something you want to be asked to reveal in a public court, by a demanding high priest determined to get his own way and trying to get rid of you.

Caiaphas is being unfair and uncaring about the human person who is in front of him. And the use of the oath is to force Jesus to speak.

This is difficult moment. If Jesus says Yes, they will call it blasphemy, since Caiaphas is not interested in learning or listening to God at all, nor open to the idea that God cares for his people. Keeping the details of the rules they have about God while missing the point of the rules completely is where Caiaphas is. For Jesus to say Yes is therefore, essentially, to sign his own death warrant. For him to say No is to be untrue to himself and to everything he believes in and stands for.

He says, as he said to Judas, ‘You have said so.’ ‘Those are your words.’ ‘You said it’. Like Judas, in answering them, he loves them, and he still leaves them the freedom to respond, the freedom to choose.

Look now, If God says to you that He is definitely God, then because of the power He has and because of His glory, you wouldn’t actually *have* a choice. Once he arrives in the clouds of heaven with the mighty One, there isn’t going to be much place for arguing the toss, we will all be on our knees.

I believe true Christian love shows restraint, and that is what Jesus is doing here. He knows they have seen the miracles. They have heard the teaching. They have felt the atmosphere. They have heard the still small voice in your soul which tugs on your whole being.

I believe you yourself have been made in the image of God, you already have that witness within you. You already know the truth which will set you free. And to give Caiaphas that freedom to decide for himself, Jesus has to hold back on giving a Yes or a No.

But love is also deeply limitless, and despite the danger he is in, Jesus tries to reach Caiaphas and straighten out his misunderstandings about the Messiah. Jesus doesn’t use the phrase ‘Son of God’ at all. He uses the expression ‘Son of Man’. Jesus is both fully divine and also fully human, and he seems to delight in this phrase from the book of the prophet Daniel. Jesus adds in a remark about the future. From now on, he says, you will see the Son of Man (that’s Jesus) sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One (that’s God the Father) and coming on the clouds of heaven.

I think he is saying something like One day you will look up and know that what you always knew to be true, actually **was** true.

He is saying that this decision they make here today will have eternal consequences. And that as they judge and mistreat this human being before them today in weakness, so one day they will stand and look up to a heavenly judge before whom they themselves will stand in weakness to be judged.

It is a solemn and a timely warning.

The final part of our story will be read to us by David. (SLIDE 3)

## David: reads Matthew 27: 11-14, ending with the usual words from the service sheet and allowing the congregation to say their response.

Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor’s question is not theological but political. Are you the king of the Jews?

Remember his birth, when the Magi came to King Herod and said ‘where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?’

The governor would know the public things. He would know that this man’s preaching was full of descriptions of a ‘*kingdom* of heaven’. He would know that there had been other uprisings against the rule of Rome. He would know and probably feel threatened by the popularity of this man both in the entry on the donkey and also among the crowds in the Temple who have been gathering and listening to his teaching all week. He would know that this man is popular. And Pilate is not popular. Pilate answers to Rome and he must keep this difficult province under control.

Jesus answers Pilate in the same way as he answered Judas, and Caiaphas. ‘You have said so.’ ‘You said it.’

And so the weak governor abdicates his governmental authority, abandons his integrity and ignores his wife. (as a married woman, I leave it to you to decide which of those is the most risky of his crimes! ☺)

In summary, I believe and the church insists that in this story we see in Jesus the love of God in human form. This is not a casual word without actions, this love. It is not spoken lightly. It is not a measured amount. Jesus doesn’t try to control anyone. He treats nobody as insignificant. He gives the same serious answer to his friend and betrayer Judas as he gives the weak-willed governor or the treacherous high priest. I believe love does not manipulate. Jesus’s behaviour is not affected by their roles, their titles and their power over his human life.

I believe that what we see here is love expended in self-giving, wholly expended, without residue or reserve, without thought of risk or of consequence to oneself. I believe love in Jesus is engaged in offering everyone a worldview in which people are more valuable than traditions. A world where people and friendship and knowing God outweighs the love of money, religious prejudices, work pressures… at the cost of their true life in fellowship with others and with God. I believe we see love restrained, power held back, love bound in position and waiting for the response of the other person. Love giving that freedom to other people to choose freely what Jesus is offering to them.

And so this week let us take that word of Jesus with us.

When we speak to him in one type of way, he will say ‘Yes, it is as you say’. ‘You said it’. What is it for us where we find ourselves saying to him ‘this, and this and such and so you see how it must be, …’ And in His grace He listens and he says to us ‘You said it’.

He will not stop us. He leaves us the freedom to choose. He doesn’t control, though he is passionately interested in us and in our decisions and our lives. But I believe that to reach us with his love he will expend all his life energy and all his abilities.

I want to leave you this morning with one last thought (SLIDE 4)

I think this picture sums up what our response might be to the love of God in Jesus. As we admire him and his strength of character we can respond in utter worship of Him. The person

In the picture we see that single minded utter focus on God. You see the person as a cup, lost in worship, adoration, contemplation. Looking upwards and focussed on God.

We serve others from the overflow of this love we receive, but we are not looking down to the sides at the overflow but looking at God. It’s easy to get bogged down in all the things people want us to do, to join service rotas or make cakes or run music boxes or transport people, but that’s looking down here at the sides, not where our focus should be.

Not looking down inside yourself but looking at God. It’s easy to get bogged down in our own problems and worries but we need to look up, to let go of those weights we carry around, to let His light shine in our hearts and let Him remake us in his image by His Spirit in us once again, in this new phase of our lives. We each of us open ourselves up in worship and prayer to receive His love for us.

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Let us pray…

Lord Jesus Christ

We have watched you talk with your unfaithful friend, and some of us may have had friends and relations who have betrayed and hurt us.

We have listened to you speaking with your ungodly priest and some of us may have been hurt by other Christians and those in church leadership.

We have seen you being let down by the judicial system because of a weak and feeble state governor, and some of us may have been hurt by not receiving the fairness and justice we expected from our legal system.

Thank you that you went so deeply into this world that you understand our hurts, our pains and our longings for fairness, justice and love in our friendships, in our church and in our government.

Give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and to put on the armour of light now in the time of this mortal life, in which your son Jesus Christ came to us in great humility;

That on the last day when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever,

Amen.

## David response reading Phil 2:5-11