

Sermon Maundy Thursday Year B 2018

According to the great astrophysicist Stephen Hawking, now recently departed, time travel is *theoretically* possible. Whether the theory bears out in *fact* has not yet been tested. I am not sure that anyone from the future has yet travelled into our present to tell us if it works. But it is certainly an idea that captures the imagination: that we might be free from our time and place and experience what would otherwise be impossibly remote. Any number of writers and movie makers have explored the idea.

In a way, what the church undertakes over the next few days is a kind of 'time travel'. We are invited to witness *for ourselves* the events of our Lord's Passion and Resurrection. Over these days, the liturgy unfolds for us in such a way *as if we were there* 2000 years ago. So, tonight we find ourselves in the upper room and later in the Garden of Gethsemane. Tomorrow we walk the Via Dolorosa - the Way of Sorrows - as Christ makes his way to Calvary. We commemorate his death and we place before us his very Cross. On Saturday we keep vigil by the tomb and wait for the first rays of light to scatter our darkness. A story that unfolded so many centuries ago becomes our story.

But more than just *look back* to those concrete moments in the past in these coming days we *carry* with us almost 2000 years of how the church has understood and interpreted these moments in time. These days together unfold with accumulated layers of how those events have been given meaning. So, our time travel takes us straight into almost 2000 years of living and continuous tradition. So many of the actions, readings, prayers, hymns, rituals have been part of the church for at least centuries and in many cases almost from the start - from the second, third or fourth centuries. There are books and documents surviving from these early centuries which point to this. And even travel diaries! One of the most colourful and interesting accounts of the church's worship at this holy time comes from a fourth century pilgrim called Egeria. Around the year 380 she travelled to Jerusalem where she recorded her observations of the Holy Week ceremonies in the Holy city. What makes her account so interesting is that it shows the rite and ceremonies she observed were *already* very full and *well established*. In the fourth century they were *not* new and novel. But also, much of what she observed and recorded form part of *our own* liturgy and traditions: centuries and centuries of continuous lived tradition...

When we look at the long history of how the church has worshipped over the centuries, and how it has sought to make sense and give expression to the mysteries at the heart of our faith, one of the very interesting dynamics at play is that *the more solemn the occasion the more conservative the ceremony*. Or in other words, the most important days of the church hold on to and maintain its most ancient customs. These days of course form the *most* solemn of the church's year. These are *the* most important events we celebrate as Christians. So, the most dramatic and important ritual actions we incorporate into our worship tonight, and over the next few days, are some of the most ancient.

We wash feet tonight in continuity with the way Christian communities have done since at least the seventh century. The earliest record is from Rome and Rome was always the *most conservative* and *last* to adopt new practices, suggesting it occurred much, much earlier in other places. The altar is stripped in much the same way as the earliest records from Spain also from the 7th century. The hymn we sing tonight as the sacrament is carried after communion from the altar to the place of repose we have been instructed to sing for the last 1000 years. Tomorrow we venerate the cross in much the same as Egeria witnessed in Jerusalem in the 4th century. The Solemn Prayers tomorrow have remained practically unchanged for 1500 years. And on Saturday we gather at night and keep vigil for our Lord's Resurrection as Christians have since at least 150AD, just a couple of generations after the actual event it commemorates. I hope that during these days you get a sense of that connection.

But it is not just the big, dramatic, important moments that have ancient ancestry. Even some of the little details can be traced back for centuries and have tenaciously held on. Such as how we ring the bells during these days. During the Gloria on this night we are bidden to ring the church bells but after which they are to fall silent until the Gloria of the Easter Vigil. It is such a seemingly small, insignificant detail. But it has, once more, a long pedigree. And is a simple, symbolic action that seeks to communicate a lot. It is a practice which is first noted in the 8th century. And from that same time the church comes to see these sacred Three Days as a time of *silence*; a time during which we mourn the suffering and death of its Lord. In Anglo Saxon times these Three Days were known as the '*still days*'. Instead of bells, wooden clappers would be used in churches and monasteries to mark the passing of days and of hours. But not only would the churches become silent. So too would houses and streets. Businesses closed. Commerce stopped. In Germany and Austria even bells on the farm would become silent.

The silencing of bells gives outward expression to what should be happening inwardly. This silence reflects something of grief. When a dear one dies often the only appropriate response is to say nothing. As we commemorate our Lord's passion and death perhaps that is our best approach - to be careful of saying too much, careful not to wrap up his death in neat, easily digestible pre-formulated responses. Perhaps it is best to sit in the silence of its mystery. Silence, stillness, quiet, recollection is the best attitude we can bring as we come to celebrate these days together.

It is an atmosphere already encouraged for us tonight. We gather here in darkness. There is no sun light pouring through our windows as they normally do when we gather in this place. And as we leave tonight we do so in silence. There is no blessing; no dismissal. Just the invitation to watch and pray, to come to the garden in silence and stillness. Watching is of course the disposition of the attentive, listening heart. So, let us carry that stillness with us tomorrow, and into Saturday too. Let us suspend normal activities. We have the blessing in this country of tomorrow being a public holiday. Not a day for gardening or housework. Not a day to catch up with odd jobs or driving long distances. These are days for stillness. We surround ourselves in the next 72 hours with ancient, noble and beautiful words, customs and rituals.

But we can only apprehend some of their mystery if we receive them in awed silence. Amen.