



St Marylebone
Parish Church

Epiphany 4 2019 8.30am BCP (Epiphany 3) Holy Communion

You have heard me say it before, Jesus turns their world upside down. It's true today too. We heard in that snippet from St Paul's letter to the Romans 'if your enemy hunger, feed him'. That may sound nice, but what would it look like in practice? Would HM's Armed Forces risk their lives to distribute aid to ISIS? Would we actually put the interests of those who have been cruel to us, deeply wronged us and those we love, above our own?

Likewise with today's Gospel. Jesus heals a Jewish leper and sends him off to tell the priests and make the appropriate thank offering to God. He then encounters a gentile – a Roman Centurion who shows more faith in Jesus than many Jews he had come across. The Jews had been waiting for God's Messiah with particular fervency for a few centuries now, the Romans weren't. Yet here is a Roman who displays more faith in Jesus than any 'in Israel'. The Centurion says, I am not worthy to have you in my house – simply say the word and my beloved servant will be healed. I know you have this power to command life and death, just as I have power to command troops.

And here we see Jesus say that God's ancient people the Jews were not to be the *only* inheritors of eternal life through Christ – but that His Kingdom encompasses all creation. Not what the Jewish religious leaders were expecting to hear at all.

These words of the centurion are picked up of course in the Eucharist. At 11.00, but not in the 8.30 BCP service, the priest holds up the host –

the body of the Risen Lord – and says words taken from St John the Baptist and the Revelation of St John the Evangelist: ‘Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, blessed are those who are called to His supper’. And the people and priest say together words taken from the centurion: ‘Lord I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof, but only say the word and I shall be healed.’

At this moment, it’s as if Jesus responds with the same words that he gave the leper at the beginning of today’s Gospel: ‘I will’. I ‘will’ it to be so. It is in audacious, outrageous, wanton love that the Holy Spirit seals Christ’s promise made hours before His death, that when we do this in remembrance of Him He will be here in His body and Blood, His life in our hands, our bodies and in our lives. We are not worthy, but He’s coming anyway.

So draw near with faith and receive the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ which He gave for you and His Blood which He shed for you. Eat and drink in remembrance that Christ died and lives for you. And feed on Him in your hearts by faith with thanksgiving.

But be careful. To take God’s own life in you week by week should come with a health warning. This is to be as close as we can on this side of death to the one who is renewing the cosmos – the coming King. Him who calls us to love without limit, Him who confounds and explodes our sense of the world, of propriety and justice. He is not a safe man to know, let alone take into your very self in this way.

A priest friend of mine was once confronted by a young mum in his congregation. She had started coming to church (this rather glamorous model and young mum) to get her children into the Church Primary School. After a few years she confronted the priest and said: ‘no one told me!’. ‘No one told you what?’ ‘No one told me that coming to the Eucharist and receiving Holy Communion every week would change my life’. She’s right. It seems she hadn’t listened to *any* of the sermons, because that is precisely what she had been told - but she was right about the other thing.