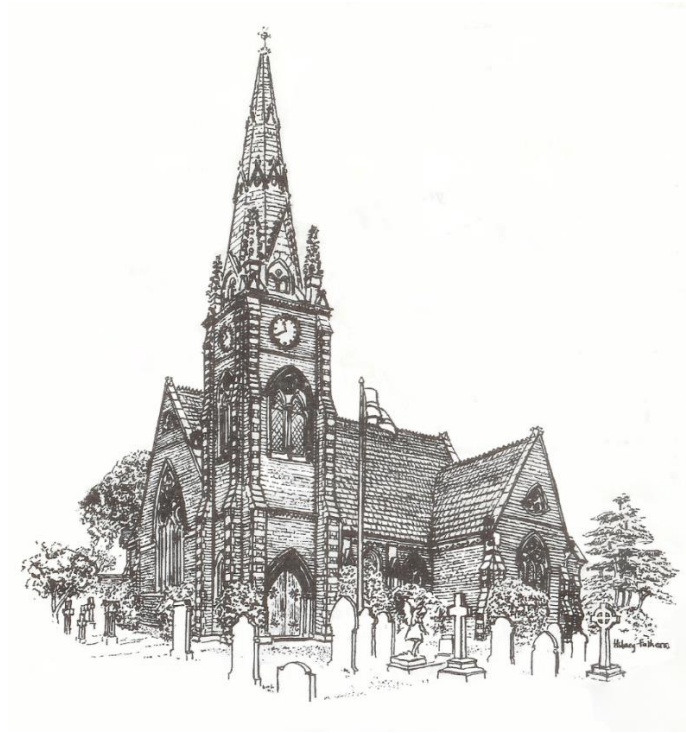


# All Saints' Thornton Hough



**Lent 2021: On the Bible's back roads  
Where old stories and our stories meet.**

**Week 7**

**Maundy Thursday April 1<sup>st</sup>:**

**The Disciple whom Jesus loved: [John 13:1-30](#): ‘Lord, who is it?’**



*Mensa Christi (Table of Christ)  
Church, Galilee*

All of us have special people in our lives; our closest family and friends, those with whom we have a very special bond. It shouldn't therefore be a surprise that 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' (v 23) had a particularly close and warm relationship with him. This disciple isn't mentioned very often and all his appearances, of which this is the first, are towards the end of John's Gospel. His identification with the writer of John (or at least the written testimony on which the book is based) has led many to conclude that he is John himself but there can be no certainty about this.

The occasion for today's reading is the Last Supper. John does not actually describe the meal as such (the other three Gospels do) but it is without doubt the same occasion. By washing the disciples' feet – something they found acutely uncomfortable – Jesus has illustrated the nature of his own servant ministry as well as providing them with an example to follow in their own future Christian service (v 15).

Then comes the bombshell; there is a betrayer in the house. The shock is palpable (v 22). They obviously want to know who it is and Peter, rather than making an approach himself, has a word with the beloved disciple about asking Jesus to identify the traitor, which he duly does (v 23-25). I think we have to imagine a pretty febrile atmosphere with all sorts of loud conversations going on with people talking across one another left, right and centre. Peter may well have asked the beloved disciple to find out who it was simply because he was the one sitting next to Jesus meaning that all he had to do was lean back and quietly whisper. In the midst of the hubbub Judas is identified by Jesus and leaves before the disciples have had a chance to understand what is going on.

I wonder also, perhaps unconsciously, whether Peter asks the beloved disciple because he considered him above suspicion given his bond of friendship with Jesus. Of course it wasn't only Judas that was to betray Jesus that night; Peter

was also about to have the most traumatic experience of his life thus far as Jesus is arrested and he finds himself, racked with fear for his own life, unable to admit any association with him. This was a traumatic night for everybody; even Jesus himself recoils in terror from what he is being asked to do in his dark night of the soul in the Garden of Gethsemane.

On a night when Jesus pleaded, Judas was on the make and Peter lost his bottle it seems that everything that the disciples thought they knew was being turned upside down. It was one thing to follow Jesus around Galilee watching him teach and heal but the trauma of his arrest put into question everything they had lived for over the past three years or so. So, they might well have asked themselves, was it all wrong and is it going to cost me my life?

There are moments in our lives when we question everything we thought we knew. An event that we didn't see coming; a medical diagnosis, a bereavement, the breakdown of a relationship, the loss of a job or even (or especially) a pandemic can make us ask questions that we didn't know needed answering and cause us immense mental, emotional and spiritual distress. If we are Christians it can lead us to seriously question our faith. How could God have allowed this to happen? Where was he when I needed him? Why doesn't he answer my prayers? What hope is there for the future?

It's important to remember that these were actually the sort of questions the disciples, including the beloved disciple, were asking that dark night. For him Jesus was a greatly loved friend, mentor, guide and teacher. To find that one of his fellow disciples was a betrayer was in itself difficult to bear but the heartbreak of seeing Jesus being crucified must have felt like having his own hands and feet pierced. Yet he was there when Jesus died, the beloved friend and follower to whom Jesus entrusts his mother (John 19 v 26-27). He shared the fear and confusion of his fellow disciples and yet had sought out Jesus' mother and accompanied her to the cross in spite of the cost to him of doing so.

The beloved disciple stands for us as an example of faith, love and loyalty that is so deeply rooted that even when life threw at him the worst thing that could possibly happen he wasn't so overwhelmed that he ran for his life without a look over his shoulder. The cost of seeing the back that he had leaned against a

couple of days before raw from flogging and against the rough wood of the cross was enormous yet his integrity remained intact, something recognised by Jesus in his request. He was still the reliable and loving friend even though he too must have thought that his own life was falling apart. It's no coincidence that when he and Peter ran to Jesus' tomb on the Sunday morning that the instant he caught sight of the strips of linen and burial cloth folded up 'he saw and believed' (John 20 v 8). It suggests to me that he had never quite given up, that there was a place in the depths of his heart that was waiting for something like this; a sign of hope that it had not just all ended in failure. He so wanted there to be more to the future than trying to pick up the pieces and carry on with a life that had lost all meaning.

I've talked with many people over the years who have come to a point in their lives when they have seriously questioned or even abandoned their faith. I wonder if the beloved disciple offers us a way of continuing to embrace our faith even though we may feel there isn't much evidence that God is around or cares about us. We may sometimes feel that God is silent yet I think this loving follower had a faith that survived somewhere in the deep places of his heart which is where God's wordless often presence is to be found.

It took a lot to keep even a sliver a faith when Jesus was arrested and crucified. Judas was certainly one who couldn't compute what was happening. There are those who believe that he had links with zealots who believed that armed insurgence was the only way forward and that when Jesus talked about suffering and dying something within him snapped and his faith that Jesus was leading him down the right path evaporated. Yet suffering and dying are integral parts of our faith. Being a Christian doesn't mean that only good things will happen to us or that there will never be moments of doubt, confusion, pain and loss. What we do know is that they never speak the final word. That final word, as the beloved disciple well knew, is love; and because Christ is risen and he was able to see and believe, so we can believe that there is nothing in heaven and earth that can separate us from that love.

**Questions:** Have there been times in your own life when events have made you question your faith? How can we keep the faith at such times?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, as we reflect on the terrible events that led to your death help us to see the thread of love that runs through them as you walk the way of the cross for us. Amen.

**Good Friday April 2<sup>nd</sup>:**

**The Repentant Criminal: [Luke 23:32, 39-43](#): 'today you will be with me in paradise.'**



*Site of the Crucifixion, Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem*

Crucifixion was a brutal, humiliating and very common method of execution in the Roman Empire. It served as a method of concentrating the minds of those who might be tempted to indulge in everything from common criminality to challenging the might of the Roman Empire. Crucifixions were carried out very deliberately on main roads into towns and occupied crosses were therefore very visible to all those entering and leaving.

There are three men each on a cross fighting for breath. They all know that they are soon to die. One of them has a mocking sign above his head saying, 'this is the king of the Jews'. The other two are criminals. One of them adds his own insults; default behaviour for those being crucified. The other one looks across and, right at its end, makes the most important discovery of his life. One of the very significant things that Luke wants us to know through his telling of the story is that Jesus, even as he dies the death of a criminal, is completely innocent. So it is that he includes the testimony of the centurion standing by Jesus' cross who says of him, 'Surely this was a righteous man' (Luke 23 v 47) as well as words of Jesus himself who prays from the cross for those who have been complicit in his death (Luke 23 v 34). This is a good man who is being executed and the repentant criminal can see it.

The criminal sees his own guilt against the innocence of the man hanging next to him. In doing this Luke intends him to speak for the rest of us. Jesus, the completely innocent one, dies on the cross for the sins of all of us. In a real sense we share the guilt of the criminal and so it is also to us that Jesus offers forgiveness and a place with him in paradise (v 43). Here the story of Jesus coming into the world to reconcile humanity to God reaches its defining moment.

We have seen throughout these meanderings along the Bible's back roads that human beings are actually capable of great things. As we have passed by we have noted Jonathan's selfless loyalty to his friend David, Esther's bravery and resourcefulness in a very scary situation and Joseph's thoughtful and sensitive care for Mary even when it looked like she had betrayed him. But we have also seen Cain's murderous intent, David's calculating methods of getting what he wanted and the spies' barbed questions to try and trap Jesus. We are such a mixed bag! In addition, many of the people we have considered, such as the paralysed man, the woman at the well, the widow of Nain and Bartimaeus have undergone significant transformation in one way or another.

Whilst we are capable of so much good, which does need to be celebrated, we have also failed to fulfil our vocation as those made in God's image to honour him and respond to his love because too often we don't live our lives in the way that we are meant to. Human beings have a tendency to put themselves first and far too often don't do a very good job of caring for one another; especially the lonely, the vulnerable and those in pain. The selfishness and greed of our generation mean that the beautiful planet we have been given is hurting like it has never hurt before. Too often we go into 'us and them' mode, failing to even try to understand what it is like being the other person. None of us would want to live in a world in which behaving selfishly, cruelly and thoughtlessly do not matter; a world without morality is unthinkable.

Yet God does not and cannot stop loving this world and everybody in it which is why there was an innocent man hanging alongside a guilty one offering him a place in paradise. Our representative on the cross clearly has a moral sense, which is why he recognises the innocence of Jesus. Yet things have also gone wrong in his life and he has got himself into trouble. He understands his need for redemption.

As he dies Jesus washes away the sins of humanity in a tidal wave of divine love which restores us, reconciles us to God and leads to the creation of a new heaven and earth where suffering and death will be no more. It isn't that God's anger had to be taken out on somebody so he sent Jesus to take the rap or that what Jesus did made God suddenly change his mind about us. The Christian faith is about God loving us so much that he sent his only and beloved Son to die

for our sins on the cross and to rise from death to assure us that there is nothing that can separate us from the reality of that love now or in eternity.

This means that the sins of those who put Jesus on his cross; those who plotted his death, those who told lies about him, those who sentenced him to death, those who flogged and beat him, those who mocked him and those who nailed him to the cross are made as nothing such is the depth and power of his love. That is why Jesus prays for their forgiveness. By being hated and offering only love in return Jesus declares that love is infinitely more powerful than hate, light will inevitably overcome all darkness and life will triumph over death. This is why Christianity is such good news.

And it is still good news! Jesus died on the cross to wash away the sins of the repentant criminal and the rest of humanity who stand in solidarity with him in his need for forgiveness. He came to show us that God loves every one of us as we are and longs for us to be healed and whole. He came to bring into this world the kingdom of God in which there is justice, peace and goodness. He came to share an amazing hope that death is not the final act of the human story but is, in a wonderful way, only the beginning.

These are powerful truths that we are called to embrace and live out. It may be that Christianity is being pushed to the margins in our society and that secular assumptions now dictate the thinking of many. But God, in Jesus Christ, still ceaselessly addresses the world with the words 'I love you' as he always will. God has not given up on the world and he calls us, as those who believe in the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, to be witnesses to the sacred truths we share.

The repentant criminal had probably only met Jesus as they were being nailed to their respective crosses. So this was the first time they had spoken to each other. It is because there isn't much time left (Jesus dies much earlier than the soldiers were expecting) that his offer of 'paradise' is gasped out so quickly (v 43). It is a word that derives from Persian and refers to a garden, enclosure or park. It is a place where there is no suffering, where there is complete peace and tranquillity and, we would add on the basis of Jesus' offer, where we will know the his presence.



In terms of our own relationship with Jesus, perhaps we speak with him every day in our prayers, perhaps we mean to or don't quite manage to do it or perhaps we haven't, if we're being honest, spoken with him in a while. Let his words of assurance to the repentant criminal personally address you now and maybe lead to a conversation with him. Luke means all of us to hear them and know that they are true for us as for the man who died with Jesus that day.

Wherever we are in life at the moment and whatever the state of our faith Jesus never stops calling to us. He doesn't just see us as we are with all our faults and imperfections, he sees what we might be, indeed what we will be in his glory. This Good Friday let's kneel at the cross once again and ask Jesus to forgive us for the times we get it wrong. He doesn't want us to grovel in the dirt before him, he wants us to look up into his eyes and know ourselves to be set free from all that pulls us down or lies to us that we are worth nothing. The stories of the people who have appeared on the back roads of the Bible converge with our stories at the cross of Christ. Here it is that God's love for the world and for everyone who has walked its roads is made visible and changes the world.

**Questions:** What does the death of Jesus mean to you? What do you want to say to him today?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, thank you that you gave your life for us all. As we ask for forgiveness fill us with new life and purpose. Amen.

## Easter Eve: Saturday April 3<sup>rd</sup>: Joseph of Arimathea: [Luke 23:50-56](#): ‘...he asked for Jesus’ body’



*Ancient tombs,  
Church of the Holy  
Sepulchre, Jerusalem*

When I was training for ordained ministry I was involved in a series of three assemblies at a local school. We decided to imagine that there had been television news broadcasts in Palestine at the time of Jesus (about 1900 years before the first actual broadcast!) complete with a newsreader and a reporter who interviewed further members of our team dressed as characters in the story. The first assembly focused on the Friday of Jesus’ crucifixion, the second on the Saturday after the crucifixion and the third on the Sunday Jesus rose from the dead. For the Saturday report one of the team came on stage completely covered in blankets. He was acting the part of one of Jesus’ disciples who had gone into hiding and he told the reporter how all his hopes and dreams had been shattered and he was now frightened for his life. For the third assembly the same team member, minus the blankets and in ordinary clothes, testified to the complete transformation that had taken place because Jesus was alive again. The point of the assemblies was to get across the profound change in mood which took place between the Friday and Sunday of Holy Week making sure not to leave the Saturday out. We enjoyed doing the assemblies and I hope the school students liked them too!

We sometimes don’t give much thought to the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Sunday but today’s reading reminds us just how traumatic the Sabbath between Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection actually was. There were no more hopes and dreams for his friends and followers; just the despair of seeing, as they thought, everything they had built those hopes and dreams on crumble before their eyes. It must have been an unbearable day.

Joseph of Arimathea shared the grief of Jesus’ followers. He was a member of the Jewish Council who was ‘waiting for the kingdom of God’ (v 51). Right at the beginning of his life, the infant Jesus met Simeon, someone else who was waiting (Luke 2 v 25), meaning that Jesus’ life was bookended by encounters with people living expectantly. Joseph was a member of the establishment to his fingertips and yet had publicly disagreed with the actions of his colleagues in

condemning Jesus at his trial. He would certainly have raised the suspicions of his colleagues that he was some kind of fifth columnist.

So to go to Pilate and ask for Jesus' body, once again publicly identifying himself with Jesus, was very risky indeed. In Mark's account of his request he adds that he went boldly (literally 'taking courage' - Mark 15 v 43). It's as if he thought through the possible consequences, took a deep breath and asked to see Pilate. The bravery and devotion of this man with a lot to lose is an inspiration. Just as rough and unfeeling hands nailed Jesus to his cross, so loving hands take him down, wrap his body and place him in his tomb (v 53). Because of the rocky terrain it was not possible to bury bodies under the ground. Instead bodies were placed in caves or, as in the case of Jesus, a specially constructed tomb that had been cut out of the rock (v 53). These were often large enough to accommodate a number of bodies hence Luke's note that Jesus' was the first body to be buried there (v 53). Having placed him in his tomb Joseph then rolls the stone across the door of the tomb (Mark 15 v 46). It was an extremely big stone and even though we know from John's account that Nicodemus was there to help (John 19 v 39), extra hands would certainly have been needed.

Joseph, whether he is aware of it or not, is being followed. The Galilean women who are keeping tabs on him had been with Jesus since the beginning (v 55). They too are brave and devoted and having noted which tomb Joseph had placed Jesus in, they go to prepare spices to anoint his body (v 56). It's important to keep in mind that Joseph and the women were preparing his body for burial rather than resurrection (v 55-56). There would have been many tears as they watched Joseph perform his melancholy duty. Whereas they once had a teacher who was more alive than anyone else they had ever met, all they had now was a body. Even though we know how the story ends, we share the profound sadness. And the Sabbath was about to begin.

I was once present at the Western Wall in Jerusalem for the eve of Sabbath celebrations. The enormous crowds and scenes of celebration were quite extraordinary. There was singing, cheering and dancing and the exhilarating party atmosphere was like nothing I'd ever experienced before. The fact that the best day of the week, the day when there was no work giving everyone a chance to rest and celebrate, was about to begin throws the despair of Joseph,

the women from Galilee and the frightened hiding disciples into stark relief. They were not even able to busy themselves to take their minds off the numbing sense of grief; all they could do, pretty much literally, was to sit there.

There are times in all our lives when we grieve the loss of a loved one or when something we massively hoped for didn't happen. Both of these elements combined in the mind of Joseph as he finished the task of burying Jesus just before the Sabbath. We all know disappointment and loss at times and they are hard to take and difficult to think and work through. As we sit next to Joseph on this particular Sabbath we might hear him talking about Jesus and the hope he had placed in him, we may hear him weeping and there may well be long periods of silence. There was that one Sabbath day's experience of the death of Jesus without the knowledge of his resurrection, and it was hard to take.

We, of course, were not there to meet with the risen Lord, and when we suffer the loss of a loved one there will be no return on the third day. The experience of Joseph and all Jesus' other friends on the Saturday is therefore closer to our own experiences of loss. The advantage we have over them at this point in the story is that we can put our trust in the risen Lord and take comfort in entrusting our loved one into his everlasting arms. This doesn't take away the tears and the pain of loss or suddenly make it alright. But it means that we have a hope that God's love is stronger than death. Joseph has placed Jesus' body in the tomb and rolled an extremely big stone across it. That, it seemed, was that. But Sunday is coming!

**Questions:** How was Joseph able to show such courage? What difference do you think being a Christian makes at a time of loss?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, as you lay in your tomb, your friends loved you even as they believed they had lost you. Thank you that you did not stay in the tomb! Amen.

## Easter Day: Sunday April 4<sup>th</sup>: Cleopas and Companion [Luke 24:13-35](#): 'Were not our hearts burning within us'

As a teenager, being a regular supporter of the local football team, the walk home after a home defeat, with its disappointment and inevitable discussions with fellow fans about the failings of individual players and the team as a whole, was always a bit of a trudge. It took me a while to realise that the result of any football match is, in the great scheme of things, pretty insignificant.

Two people with far, far more to be disappointed about, are walking back home to Emmaus. They are downcast and it is good that they have each other (they may well have been a married couple). Things have moved on a little since yesterday because of strange reports of an empty tomb and a vision of angels (v 22-24) but the penny hasn't yet dropped and the mood is still one of despondency.

But this is the day that changes everything. As they explain their sadness to the stranger, the continuing problem for Cleopas and his companion, notwithstanding angelic visitations, is the finality of crucifixion - Jesus is dead! It's difficult to know why they failed to recognise him as he walked along, but the intuitive leap required was clearly beyond them. I remember some years ago watching a singing competition on television of the kind in which one contestant was knocked out each week until the last two remaining singers battled it out in the final. It wasn't until the very last show that I realised that I had seen one of the finalists performing at a free concert during the Orkney Folk Festival a few years before. At no point during the series up until that point had I made the connection.



*Sun, sky and trees on the Mount of Olives*

The heart of this beautiful story comes after Cleopas and his companion invite Jesus to stay with them. It is as they are at table that suddenly Jesus, for him it is, takes over the duties of the host. As he takes the bread, gives thanks, breaks it and begins to give it to them (v 30)

they suddenly see who it is and we see the unmistakable shape of the service

by which we remember his sacrifice week by week. It is a moment of recognition before Jesus suddenly vanishes. Holy Communion, the Eucharist, Mass, the Lord's Supper, whatever we call it, is not just about remembering events of two thousand years ago, it is about recognising the presence of the living Lord who meets us in bread and wine before sending us out to share his love.

As Cleopas and his companion reflect on their experience, they realise that the transformation actually began on the road when their hearts burned as the 'stranger' opened the Scriptures to them (v 32). So it is that on our life journey Jesus is always with us even when we don't recognise he's there. We may not feel his presence, we may be too busy to even think about it or we may not be open to the possibility; but he is there. And his risen presence has the power to transform.

The two travellers immediately turn themselves around and head for Jerusalem where they meet the other disciples who are also full of joy having embraced the unlooked for, un hoped for truth that Jesus is alive. It seems that by this stage, of the eleven (no Judas, of course), Jesus had as yet appeared only to Peter (called Simon here, which was his real name – v 34). I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall on that occasion. Not only has Peter had to deal with the death of his great friend and teacher, he's also had plenty of time to reflect on his own moral failure in denying three times that he had ever had anything to do with him. Jesus has not yet fully restored him and made him ready to lead the church; that comes later in Galilee (John 21 v 15-17). But the joy and the sheer relief of Peter must have been palpable.

It's worth pointing out that this story is about people who initially found the idea that anybody could rise from the dead very difficult to get a handle on; it was every bit as challenging a concept for them as it is in today's secular culture. Cleopas and his companion were intelligent human beings who, as we have seen, were unable to grasp that Jesus was the one walking and talking with them because, to their minds, it was an impossibility.

We don't have to throw our brains away to believe that Jesus rose from the dead. It was something he said would happen, there is a solid historical

foundation for believing it and it offers us and our distracted generation an entirely new perspective on life. This is not pie in the sky when you die; its credible truth attested to by many witnesses. We are not just here by chance; we are here because we are children of God. This life is not all there is; it is part of something much greater and more wonderful. In our daily lives we are not left to shift for ourselves, Jesus has promised us his constant presence. The risen Lord offers all of us, along with the repentant criminal, the hope of glory and the assurance that we will be with him for ever.

At each service of Holy Communion we remember the story of Jesus' suffering and death as we share tokens of bread and wine taking us back to the moment his body was broken and blood poured from the wound in his side. It sounds quite grim put like that. Yet this sacrifice had to be made both to deal with the sins that disfigure our own lives and the world of which we are a part. It was the victory of the risen Lord over sin and death on the cross that opened the way to a sure and certain hope and hands us an invitation to be citizens of the new heaven and new earth (Rev 21 v 1). Because Jesus died and rose again, we will see God's kingdom in all its fullness. We share a hope that in that kingdom there will be no more tears or pain, all wrongs will have been put right and we will be able to enjoy God for ever. If that isn't good news, I don't know what is.

Our call as Christians is to be witnesses to these truths and make them visible in the way we live our lives. We won't be able to do that perfectly because we are all fallible and sometimes make mistakes. Those who saw the risen Jesus after his resurrection were just as human as we are yet many people became followers of Jesus because of their faithful witness. The key thing is that we don't have to share our faith in the risen Lord in our own strength, even though that is too often the way we choose to do it. We have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit to encourage and enable us. Jesus was only able to be in one place at one time but the Holy Spirit is with all believers all the time to guide us into all truth (John 16 v 13) and help us to live out our faith and witness to the amazing truth that 'Christ has died, Christ is risen and Christ will come again'.

Alleluia Christ is risen! He is risen indeed, Alleluia!

**Questions:** How often do you recognise the presence of Jesus in your life? What might help to make you more aware of it?

**Prayer:** Risen Lord Jesus, thank you that you are with us today and every moment of our lives. Help us to put our trust in you and to recognise your presence. Amen.