

Easter Sunday sermon notes

20th April 2014

What a lot can happen in a week! Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday; both very jubilatory, but in between there has been a huge swing, a story that at times is very painful to tell. We've marked the tough journey Jesus had to face, the burdens he had to carry, as we've walked from church to church through the week, carrying a cross. We've heard of Jesus's humility and servant-like approach as he washed his disciples' feet, we've shared the deeply intimate fellowship of the Last Supper, which was also the first communion. We've heard of how Jesus was betrayed by the kiss of a good friend, denied by another even closer friend, and then finally the horror of the unfolding events of Good Friday, and of course, the tense and silent pause that is Holy Saturday. All of which combines to make Easter Sunday so very much more special, so very much more hopeful, than if we had just gone straight from palm branches to resurrection. You have to go through the blood, sweat and tears to appreciate fully how very precious the good news of today is. And what a lot can happen in a year! At Easter a year ago, we had no idea that Robin and Katharine were going to be leaving us. At Easter this year we can gather together knowing that our new vicar has been appointed, and looking forward very much to him coming. It's good news and we are excited about the future. But it hasn't been easy in between, a lot of extra work has fallen on various people's shoulders, and I'd like to thank you all for your part in that. People have been thanking me and Mary, and Murray and Sue, and the Elders and others, but we couldn't have done it without all of you. The fact that we now know just how tough it is to be without a vicar makes the arrival of new one very welcome indeed! Steve, our new vicar, has a lot to offer and I don't think he'll have much to learn, other than to get to know us all, of course – which is quite a task in itself! However he might appreciate this little book that I was given recently, called Rules for Reverends – not because he needs to be told what to do, but because it just makes me laugh, and laughter is very important – and in fact has played a huge part in our vacancy I think. So I thought I'd share a few of my favourite Rules for Reverends with you: - If you let the children at the biscuits first, there will be none left for anyone else. Devise a plan to avoid this. Or frighten the children out of church altogether, this will not be difficult. - Most church problems are sorted out by the people who know, in the car park afterwards. - It's not worth having the original meeting at all, when you think about it. - If you have three or more churches, you will at least once a year design a rota that requires you to be in two places at once. Not even you can do this. - Learn how to call a raffle quickly. Otherwise there will be many many hours of your life that you will never get back. - The contents of the flower cupboard are a mystery, one not to be explored without prayer and fasting. - If you do the washing up, at least you'll start with a mess and end with it sorted. Nothing else in your day will be like this. - In heaven you will probably meet the person who invented the tambourine. You can look forward to this. Unless they're somewhere else. - Other people's Pet Services look like such a good idea, don't they? But yours will be the one where the snake escapes. - The recycled sermon you use in desperation will be the only one someone remembers from the first time. - You drink more communion wine than anyone else. You owe it to yourself to make sure it's decent. - And one for Robin - working harder at this job won't get you any more money. Unless you become a bishop, a dean or an archdeacon. And who'd want to be one of them? All of which, laughter aside, got me thinking about rules. And that there are two meanings to that word. One is the sort of 'rules of life' version, as in this is how things work, this is how the world goes round, if you do 'a', then 'b' will follow, if you do 'c', then 'd' will happen. And then there are the other sort

of rules which tell us how to behave, what to do. And it struck me that Jesus was a great rule-breaker, whichever way you look at it - which is interesting when you think that the way the church is portrayed today, especially in the media, is that it's all about what you should and should not do. And yet the Son of God, whose life and death we proclaim today, was a huge rebel, he ripped up the rule book in every sense. By which I don't mean to say that he encourages us to be criminal, or disobedient - and especially not disobedient to God. His sermon on the mount offers us many challenges on how we should live our lives, and as part of that great sermon he says: "I have not come to abolish the law, but to fulfil it". It's that fulfilment that we celebrate today. But he got into trouble, the trouble that ultimately led to his death, because he broke the rules that he saw us unnecessary, and uncaring, and even un-godly - the rules that would penalise him for healing someone on the Sabbath, rules that made the temple a market place of money changers, and sellers of sacrificial animals, rather than a place of worship, rules that would have a woman stoned to death, by people no less sinful than her. At one point he is directly asked, by an expert in the law we are told, "Which is the greatest commandment?" It's a trick question, designed to trip him up, the likelihood was that any answer he gave would have created a problem. At that time the Jewish law had progressed from the 10 commandments of the Old Testament, to a set of rules that numbered over 600, most of which were "do not's" rather than "do's". Jesus's answer is stunningly simple, and actually unarguable with. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it. Love your neighbour as yourself." It's not rocket science, is it. It doesn't take much to see that if we all lived like that the world would be a much better place, without any rule books required. And just a few weeks ago we had the story of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at the well, that was breaking a rule in itself, because as a Jew he shouldn't have spent any time with a Samaritan, or a woman, and a sinful woman at that. But starting a conversation with her breaks down some barriers, and then she asks him a question about where is the right place to go to worship - should it be the mountain where her own people went, or the temple in Jerusalem, which the Jews stipulated? In a way she is saying, "what are the rules about worshipping God?" "What are the rules about doing church?" Again Jesus's answer is stunningly simple. "A time is coming, and has now come, when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks." And so Jesus takes a rule book that is inches thick, and replaces it with a few simple rules of his own, simple and yet very challenging. Love God, worship him honestly, from the heart and the soul, and treat all those around you as people who God loves too. That isn't as easy as it sounds, but we don't need anything else. But why should we live life like that - just because we're told to? Can it be that we might actually want to follow this way of life? What sort of motivation might we have for that? Let's come back for a minute to the other sort of rules - not the ones that tell us what to do, but the ones that just say 'this is how life is', the 'b' follows 'a' rules, and remember that Jesus broke those too. Those are the rules that say a man who has been paralysed for the best part of 40 years can't just stand up and walk. Those are rules that say water stays water, and can't be turned into wine. Those are the rules that say you can't feed 5000 people with 5 loaves and two fish. Those are the rules that say a man can't walk on water. Jesus tore a hole through all of those to show us that with God anything is possible. And, of course, he broke the biggest rule of all - the rule of death, the rule that says, that's it; the rule that says that's how it all ends, for all of us. That's the rule that he broke for ever, wonderfully and gloriously in the dawn light of that first Easter morning. It's not surprising that it took so long for the disciples and Mary to believe what they were seeing. They knew he was dead, they watched him die, they saw him taken down from

the cross, and that should have been it, and yet now with their own eyes, first Mary, and then the others see the most impossible of impossible things, and slowly come to realise that it really is true. When we celebrate Easter we rejoice in a God who faced the rule of death and stared it down with his own love and his own life. And he is the same God who has the last word on the way in which he wants us to live, both now and forever. Jesus didn't come to earth to be a nuisance. And he didn't come to earth to tell us what to do. In fact he told us himself why he came. "I have come" he said, "that you may have life and have it to the full." The one rule of life that we need is that we are absolutely right to believe that Jesus, the Son of God, died for us, and rose again to give us the hope of heaven, and hope for today. Good news indeed, and especially on Easter day. JG