

Easter reflection

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Nicola has painted our Paschal Candle this year with a dove and with olive branches – symbols of peace that speak our prayers in this very dangerous time. On this joyful day, we celebrate the Resurrection of our Lord and Saviour – the Prince of Peace. But we're celebrating at a time where wars rage and some of the combatants are invoking Jesus as their champion. So there are more-than-usually distorted brands of Christianity being presented to the world. The message some church leaders in powerful countries are presenting to the world is shockingly twisted. Their idea of a Christian message is a vicious brand of bombastic triumphalism. It's nothing new. But we're seeing this happening in our daily news with wartime leaders getting themselves publicly blessed by compliant church leaders. How can any Church bless their sort of behaviour – as though God condones it!?

We've spent the season of Lent – and particularly Holy Week – focussed on Jesus' own example of *emptying himself* of his divine power; of *rebuking his disciples* when they spoke or acted violently. On Palm Sunday, we saw him enter Jerusalem in peace, even while the crowds were egging him on to seize power and save them. On Maundy Thursday, we saw him risk his life by staying in Jerusalem to teach his disciples about three things: to follow his example of gentle service to others as their model of real leadership; to love others selflessly like he loved them; and to remember him always as the one who offered his own body and blood to protect us. So peaceful; so generous; so full of love for others.

So suddenly, in today's climate of barbaric distortions of how to follow Christ, I look at our Easter service booklet with

somewhat different eyes. I'm conscious that our service begins by announcing our sure hope of sharing Jesus' *triumph* over death. The Exsultet says Jesus rose *triumphant* from the grave. And we're singing hymns about Jesus as the risen, *conquering* Son, about joining in hymns of *triumph*; and about Easter as *our triumphant* holy day. Are we proclaiming a message that could be co-opted to triumphalism; to an obsession with success and power? When we use language like this, we run a risk of it detouring our discipleship into strange places – turning us away from Christ's example of servant leadership and self-giving love to the point where he willingly gave his life for others.

So I think our Easter message at this very dangerous moment in history is that we need to learn from the people who really do reflect these characteristics of our Lord. The Christians I'm aware of who truly reflect Christ's self-giving love are actually pretty hard to see. They don't put themselves forward as leaders or movers and shakers. They're more likely to be quietly praying for us – another thing Jesus did a lot. They're more likely to be interrupted by someone in need, and putting down what they were doing to attend to that other person's needs.

They may be seen as fools ^(1 Cor 1 18-25) who give away their lives for others. But they do reflect Christ to the world; the Christ who gave everything, who died for us and rose again.

So it's appropriate that before we renew our baptismal promises on this Easter Morning, we hear again the charge that is our baptismal blessing. It's our job-description for a faithful Christian life that is seen as such foolishness by the power-obsessed of this world.

Go forth into the world in peace; be of good heart;
hold fast that which is good; render to no one evil for evil;
strengthen the faint hearted; support the weak;
help the afflicted; give honour to all;

love and serve the Lord,
rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit ... Amen