

Foreword

Readers need to note that 'Overbridge' is a fictitious name for the village in which our friends Mary, Christine, Paul, John, Gladys, Peter, Elizabeth and Tony live. However, they would be aware, if you should ever ask them, that the name 'Overbridge' corresponds, metaphorically, to their understanding of Christian faith as faith in Jesus who is alive. In response to him they have gone over the same 'bridge' that he crossed. His was death, theirs is baptism into Christ and a living faith. It may also be that although the discussion of the changes in the friends' worship at St Paul's Overbridge does not reflect your experience, yet be assured that the problems aired in these discussions have deep roots in the history of our own part of the Church and are well and alive today.

Small groups of people and individuals had been going into the village church for the past ten minutes. John often waited for friends to arrive but this morning he went in and found a seat by himself to the right of the altar. The chairs were arranged on three sides and a small lectern was placed on the other side facing west. There were only five minutes before the eucharist was due to begin. It was Palm Sunday and John felt again that interesting heightening of awareness that Holy Week and Easter brings to the Christian community. He mused a little on the events of that first Easter and what had led up to it - the warnings that the Son of Man would be despised and killed. Then the 'entry' into the holy city with a band of followers and the extraordinary scene in the temple when Jesus, as it were, took the whip hand over those who were opposed to him, tying up later with the story of the wicked husbandmen and the cursing of the fig tree. Then the Supper, the Garden and the terrifying end to his life.

This morning in St Paul's, the eucharist was just as it always was when the community gathered together to make eucharist. John saw his friends scattered around - Christine over by the lectern, Paul not far from her and Mary towards the back having come in a little late. The reading for the epistle, from Zechariah, set the tone for the day -

'Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on an ass
..... because of the blood of my covenant
.... I will set your captives free.'¹

Then the gospel -

'Hosannah! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming! Hosannah in the highest! And he entered Jerusalem, and went into the temple; and when he had looked round at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.'²

Soon they were all making thankful remembrance of all that God had done in Jesus - his life and ministry, his death and resurrection and the life-giving Spirit that had brought even this small community to worship Jesus as Lord - and receiving again, as for the first time, those tokens of his life in the bread and the wine. Over the centuries and among so many different people the life of Jesus had indeed been received and had set them free. This morning at Overbridge it was no different

¹Zechariah 9: 9-11

²Mark 11: 1-11

and when finally the people poured out of the little village church the four friends eventually came together and went, as they usually did to one of their homes for coffee. They were all hard working folk during the week but Sunday never found them absent unless it was something out of the ordinary. They knew each other very well, having grown up in the village and then to school and college. So while Mary was making the coffee, Paul started the ball rolling in typical vein, "You know, it struck me this morning that it is such an extraordinary contrast - our happy service, serious but relaxed, here this morning and those last shattering days of Jesus' life. I suppose that it is good that we can make remembrance of them in such an ordinary, low-key way because our own lives are set very much in the same way as his was - not 'religious' but to do with the challenges of real life and the continual struggle to relate everything in some way to our faith. Only, for us, it is so different than it was for Jesus because he broke through the barriers of indifference and unfaith and evil and was vindicated by God after his terrible death. To remember him in worship and prayer is such a fantastic leap of faith and acceptance of the things he did and the person he was."

"I agree, Paul," said Mary, as she came in with the coffee. "I heard you through in the kitchen, and I said to myself, 'Paul is putting my very thoughts into words!' I was astonished when I became a Christian that one could both accept these strange facts of Jesus' life and become an actual friend of his in this Christian community as part of my real life and work. The connection then between Jesus and myself was one of continual exploration of the reality of putting my trust in the Lord who is alive. I had thought, previously, before I became a disciple, that Christianity was all about going to services and ceremonies laid down by the Church and that you were obliged to get through a sort of drill of 'worship' each week. Now I find that in between the real worship we share here, in Christ and with one another, I want to open my self to the Spirit and to continue the relationship with God in Jesus in all sorts of ways."

"Well, there you are!" said Christine, laughing, "our theologian has support from the cook! And I agree, too. I have been wanting to say how extraordinarily fortunate we are in this place. Some Christian communities have been plagued by versions of Christian worship that are so complicated and dependent on fantastic theories of what is supposed to 'happen' in worship. I know, because I went to some lectures on 'worship and spirituality' recently!"

"Now, come on, Christine, don't leave us on tenterhooks," exclaimed John; "spill the beans! What did you find out?"

"What interested me at the time was a lecture on contemporary liturgy, looking towards the year 2000. It began with an account of the last week in Jesus' life - rather as we are commemorating it this coming week. But the lecturer got into great difficulties - or so it seemed to me. The whole account he gave of how we 'connect' with Jesus' life and death, through worship, was so complicated. The great words were 'mystery' and 'realistic liturgy' by which he meant that the presence of God was somehow brought to us by the liturgical rite itself. This was to be done in such a way that we intended not simply to make a 'mere memorial' but to actualise and make present the power and the events of Jesus' death and resurrection. He had some theory that this was what the Jews meant when they made a remembrance of Passover each year. But I think that he got into a muddle there as I have also heard from my Jewish friends that at Passover they dramatize the first Passover so that they can almost feel what it was like to be there, crossing the Red Sea, and the excitement and relief at their escape from Egypt. But the lecturer said that we experience the events of Calvary brought to us here in church, so that they are tangible and so that we can encounter the risen Christ! So, was he saying that faith is faith in the eucharistic rite rather than belief in the real Jesus who lived and died and was raised? Didn't Paul say somewhere that 'If you confess with your lips and believe in your heart, you will be saved'? Well, I found it so extraordinarily confusing that I spoke to the lecturer afterwards. He couldn't have been nicer and tried to explain to me that the Church's ministry is to convey the power of the events of Jesus' life and death through worship rites

and that on the feasts of the Calendar we experience the actual events that we are celebrating. I was too aghast to say anything but 'Thank you' - and fled!"

The conversation always hit some knotty problem on a Sunday morning in the little group as they all had more than a smattering of understanding of the issues raised by the New Testament and the historical and contemporary interpretations of it. For them, faith in the living Lord was paramount and they did all they could to make their worship and daily life cohere so that they could give a reason to others of their faith. Now John came into the discussion, having listened intently to Paul and Mary and Christine.

"I wonder if some people have really got confused by the endless arguments in the past between the churches on what happens in the eucharist and so there is a sort of vacuum of understanding which is filled either by superstition or by one of these very strange fantasies. But the majority of people have just got on with worship and survive, despite all the difficulties made for them by enthusiastic movements for the elaboration of services. Perhaps we do need to think out for ourselves the real relation between worship and the New Testament conception of living in Christ? I know that we are not theologians but at least we have a responsibility to answer anything as weird as this lecturer Christine met. What do you think?"

Paul was always one for digging deeper and now he made some interesting suggestions. "Is not the root of the problem of worship for these liturgical theorists to be found in their lack of understanding that the New Testament witnesses to the fact that Jesus, in his life and death brought into being the 'rule' of God promised to Israel for so long and now an accomplished fact, or at least a beginning which was for good. The kingdom of God arrived in Jesus. He lived it and died living it, overcoming all evil in himself. All that he did in his ministry - teaching, healing and mighty works of one kind or another - pointed to the inauguration of that rule of God and an invitation to follow Jesus. Now, if that was true about Jesus during his life, surely we have the fruits of that life now, we who are his post-Easter disciples? Part of the significant response to him lies in our worship and prayer as we gather together with Jesus as the Lord of the church and as we continue that relationship as we live out our daily lives."

"Don't you think, though, that the New Testament idea of the 'kingdom' is very difficult to grasp, Paul? I have met some of these folks who speak about 'liturgy and worship' and any mention of the New Testament is, according to them, quite irrelevant, never mind the idea of 'kingdom'!"

"Well, that is true, John. But all that they need to do is to read some good book on the New Testament such as Dr N.T. Wright's recent book 'Jesus and the Victory of God' and they would be well away."

"That is a splendid book," said Christine, "and everyone should read it. But if anyone needs an 'instant' introduction, Tom Wright's 'The Lord and his Prayer' will introduce them to his understanding of the kingdom. For instance, he makes very clear that to any contemporary of Jesus, 'kingdom' would immediately recall the hope that God was still going to come and be King of Israel, although at the moment he had let the nation be virtually enslaved by the Romans. But Jesus, as we can see from the gospels, turned many nationalistic ideas inside out - rather like the great prophets. God was not bound by all the things that the Jews had come to cherish as separating them from other nations - the temple, the land, their own nation, the Law. Jesus reformed and enlarged the people of God and all that they had cherished came to fulfilment in him when he was vindicated by God."

"Splendid! It is obvious that Christine has been doing some homework," laughed Paul. "Now I would go on to say that we are, in Christ, the heirs of the new covenant, we are the temple in Christ, we have the Law renewed as love and mercy to be shown to all. Yes, it seems to me that all this is what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God being at our very doors - it has been continually enlarged as, one by one, people throughout the centuries have been joined to Christ under this very banner of the rule of God. It is this that must undergird all our ideas of worship and prayer today and not the

mistaken theories of liturgical and spiritual pundits.”

“You have got something there, Paul,” said John. “Today, and perhaps for a long time Christians have had a very individualistic and pietistic notion that, one by one, we enter the kingdom of God to be saved; but, with the young Augustine, they mostly say, ‘But not yet, please, Lord!’ Also, perhaps the theorists have all along been imagining that what Jesus was about, inaugurating the kingdom of God, was to be understood in a sort of two dimensional way rather than in the multi-dimensional way as it is set out in the dynamics of the gospel writings. For us, to be in Christ, is to be involved in the new age as a permanent feature of life - now. One can understand that this is very difficult to accept unless you see the gospels and the writings of the first Christians as something much more than a flat, historical narrative that belongs in the past. It is the difference between looking at a picture of the Lake District and actually being there and looking around at the hills, the trees, the flowers and the farmsteads where people can be seen going about their work. Somehow, as we are incorporated into Christ by becoming disciples, we enter the ambience of a fuller life - one might say one enters the ‘divine’ life, but it is here and now. It has just struck me that perhaps the reason why the first disciples spoke of Jesus as divine, as son of God, was precisely because they were experiencing this new dimension of life with the risen Jesus. Be that as it may, as Paul says, in one of his graphic metaphors, we ‘put on’ Christ when we become his friends. We don’t join the ecclesiastical archaeological club. However, I can well imagine that people can get locked up in a sort of ‘religious’ way and unable to see in the gospels the real and undeniable truth of Jesus’ vocation and mission as he lived it and not as seen through the spectacles of later church theories about incarnation and atonement. It is true that it is only when you really begin to respond to Jesus from the heart and mind, rather than from a party platform whether protestant or catholic, liberal or conservative, that the wonderful thing happens and you are free to be yourself and so able to receive the fulfilment of life promised to the disciples of every age. But of course, this way of Christian faith is far from providing security of any kind. Do you think that the kind of theory that Christine found in that lecturer is a way of providing certainty? In a way, the sacramentalist view taken to extremes is the obverse of the literalist or fundamentalist viewpoint. They must have everything buttoned up.”

“Yes,” Mary chimed in, “I think that it is interesting how the emotional and psychological problems of religious people tend towards a sort of neurosis so that they are in fact more in danger of becoming afraid of real life than the non-Christian. They feel the need to erect images and symbols of truth in a perverse sort of way; far from the proper use of symbol and metaphor to express the reality of God and our relationship with him in Christ. Of course, the theologians who propose these weird theories of how we are in relationship to Christ, use a sophisticated kind of technical jargon to cover up the neurosis. That is why everything seems to go hazy when you try to understand what Christine described!”

Not to be outdone, as the time was getting on and the friends would soon have to get back home and help with the Sunday dinner chores, Christine said, “What strikes me about the present climate in religious affairs is that there is a deep and sincere desire in many people to find what they would describe as a ‘spiritual’ way of life. The common worship of the churches does not appear to help them to find this and so there have arisen these ‘industries’ of spiritual direction and counselling to which they turn for help. But unfortunately this is deeply individualist, even if everyone at some time needs to have a ‘soul friend’ in whom they can confide and share with in a healthy sort of way. I found it exciting to hear what Paul and John were saying about the kingdom inaugurated and lived by Jesus and in which, with Jesus, we receive new life here and now. It seems to me that this is the meaning of our worship together with Christ and it is in that context that we shall become spiritual persons rather than through these ‘spirituality’ courses of which I had such an unfortunate experience! But now I must go and help at home. I do look forward to the celebrations this week. It is the first time that I have been at home for Easter for a few years and I have heard so much about

the new approach to Good Friday onwards.”

“Yes, Christine,” said John, “there has been a marvellous change. The days from Maundy Thursday to Easter Day are full of depth in the simplicity of the eucharist celebrated each day. Look forward to seeing you there.”



The Four Days of Easter

On Maundy Thursday, early, because many of the Overbridge community had to go to work, the Eucharist was celebrated in the usual way and as it would also be on Good Friday and Holy Saturday. The point was that the Eucharist is the typical way for the Christian community to worship together. The readings in the first part highlighted a particular day being commemorated. So this morning Paul’s affirmation of one of the earliest bits of Christian tradition was read:

‘For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.’³

This was followed by the gospel reading from Mark, the account of the Last Supper:

‘And as they were eating, he took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them, and said, “Take; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly, I say to you, I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”’⁴

There was a stillness among the assembled friends as these familiar words were read, echoing the conviction of all, that at the heart of this morning’s worship the same Jesus was Lord and present to them, as to all who follow in his Name.

This Eucharist was the beginning of the Paschal celebrations and its tone of glory and confidence would carry right through the following three days - through the readings from the first Christians’ understanding of Jesus’ life and death to that death and vindication. So, having given thanks for all that God had done in Christ, and being renewed in the participation of bread and cup, they dispersed to their work in continuing witness of this faith that had been expressed in worship. This same Christ was indeed the Lord of history and of all life.

Good Friday dawned with a sharp touch of frost, different from the settled weather of yesterday, and with a hint of more troubled weather to come. But it was holiday and the first families were moving out for the weekend as the Overbridge community assembled for a Eucharist at the Sunday time of 9 o’clock. Here, in the village church, there was a general expectancy and eagerness, ready to praise God for all that had been done in and through Jesus, the King and Messiah of the new covenant. And the first reading did indeed set that tone:

‘Thus says the Lord: "In a time of favour I have answered you, in a day of salvation I have helped you; I have kept you

³1 Corinthians 11:17-32

⁴Mark 14:17-25

and given you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages; saying to the prisoners, 'Come forth,' to those who are in darkness, 'Appear.' They shall feed along the ways, on all bare heights shall be their pasture; they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall smite them, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them. And I will make all my mountains a way, and my highways shall be raised up. Lo, these shall come from afar, and lo, these from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Syene." Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his afflicted."⁵

This was made explicit in the next reading from Hebrews from that unknown author who underlined, in chapter after chapter, the conviction that Jesus had completed in his life and death the expectations of the Jewish priesthood and the sacrifices of the Law:

'But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, then to wait until his enemies should be made a stool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds," then he adds, "I will remember their sins and their misdeeds no more." Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin. Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."⁶

And the way of Jesus' sacrifice, the way of love and obedience, was explained by John in the gospel:

'When Judas had gone out, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of man glorified, and in him God is glorified; if God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going you cannot come.' A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."⁷

So the Good Friday celebration continued with the great thanksgiving and communion 'proclaiming the Lord's death until he should come'. This was no pietism as in much of Christian devotion on this day for many centuries past, but an expression of the living gospel of the Lord who died 'for us' and has been vindicated and is the present Lord of the Church and of the world that does not yet know him.

The next link in this Paschal celebration was early on Holy Saturday, at the Eucharist, where the 'connection' between Christ's own Passover and our discipleship was made clear in our own baptism into Christ -

'For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit; in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers

⁵Isaiah 49: 8-13

⁶Hebrews 10:13-25

⁷John 13:31-38

subject to him.’⁸

Similarly, also, the gospel in John reminded the friends of Overbridge where their true stock and loyalty lay -

“‘I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.’”⁹

Throughout these past three days when life had gone on as usual for Overbridge, the story of the living Lord, as Messiah and Servant had been proclaimed from the centre of the Christian community busy about that worship which expressed their faith. It had been quietly exultant and yet thoughtful, and both those tones broke out on Easter Day in a climax.

So, on Easter morning, there was, first of all, the clear announcement of Jesus as Lord of all -

‘Christ is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities -- all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, provided that you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which has been preached to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.’¹⁰

There followed the passion of the Son of Man, the ‘once for all’ climactic event of Calvary -

‘Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover; it was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, “Behold your King!” They cried out, “Away with him, away with him, crucify him!” Pilate said to them, “Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar.” Then he handed him over to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus, and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called the place of a skull, which is called in Hebrew Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them..... After this Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the scripture), “I thirst.” A bowl full of vinegar stood there; so they put a sponge full of the vinegar on hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the vinegar, he said, “It is finished”; and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.’¹¹

Finally, the sequel, the meeting with Mary Magdalene on the ‘third day’, one of a series of meetings recorded in the New Testament, giving meaning to all Christian faith in the crucified Messiah -

‘Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” Mary Magdalene went and said to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.’¹²

⁸1 Peter 3:17-22

⁹John 15: 1-17

¹⁰Colossians 1:15-23

¹¹John 19:17-42

¹²John 20: 1-18

What the Christian community at Overbridge was celebrating during the Easter Feast reverberated with the convictions of Christians throughout the centuries that Christ, their King, was continually drawing men and women into the covenant with God - which he initiated in his life and death - here and now in this world of laughter and sorrow, of pain and death. He is the same Lord, 'yesterday, today and for ever', who is known in the breaking of the bread and for whom worship is the expression of our faith, and the token of our gift of life to him as Lord and Master, before the Father, in the Spirit.



On Easter Day St Paul's community was certainly *en fête*. After the Eucharist there was breakfast for all and Christine found herself with one of her old friends, Gladys, in a small group. Hot rolls and coffee appeared and everyone 'tucked in' to the butter and marmalade. Gladys had always lived in the parish and had seen quite a few changes in her time in the services at the church. "I like the way we 'do' Easter, now", Gladys said. "But of course there was something to be said for the old ways when sleep was at a premium and by Easter morning you felt that you had really done a steeple chase!"

Christine volunteered, "You mean, of course, Gladys, that after the evening Eucharist on Maundy Thursday you got up at some unearthly hour to pray at the altar of repose. And then on Good Friday you were here again three times in the day - for Mattins at 9 o'clock, the Good Friday liturgy at noon and then the procession of witness in the late afternoon with the other churches in the district."

"Yes, you are quite right," said Gladys. Good it was, too. It quite pushed you into a sharper frame of mind, despite the lack of sleep. But then, on Saturday, of course, we had a bit of a lie in and then prepared to spring clean the church and get the flowers ready for the Vigil. No rest after that! For of course we were up at the church just before midnight for the lighting of the new fire in the porch - that was generally hilarious with the weather we have here in April - followed by the lighting of the Candle and the long lessons and then the Easter Eucharist. Exhausting you say? - I can tell you! On Easter Monday you felt as if you had jaundice. But it was worth it!"

Mary had joined the group, having helped with the breakfast and heard the last part of Gladys' exuberant tale of yesterday. "Well, Gladys, I'm sure that I couldn't have lasted out! Besides, as we have the Easter Feast now it seems that somehow we have recovered a way of giving thanks for the first Easter and all that led up to it for Christ, which must have been buried under all the ceremonies and different times of services, as if it were like a continuous passion play."

"But, Mary," said Peter, who had been sitting quietly listening to the conversation and enjoying his coffee, "don't you think that the old way of keeping in outline to the times of events - roughly, anyway - like Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, helps to stimulate a devotional spirit and to reflect on the most important events in history? We used also to do the Stations of the Cross on Good Friday morning, which Gladys didn't mention, and that, of course, was very moving and helpful for meditation."

"Well, Peter, I have often thought about this 'timing' of the events in Jesus' life, especially his last days. They were unique moments in his life - the Last Supper in the evening, for instance. Then came his death, and the resurrection that gives all meaning to it; and that has changed everything. Through his resurrection we have, with him, entered the new age and so it is not the time

of the original events that has meaning for us, but the person of Jesus. So when we come together for worship with the Lord we come to the normal eucharistic gathering which can be at any time - the timing is not significant and, I think, should not be."

Christine butted in at this point. "I appreciate what Gladys was saying - and I used to enjoy those ceremonies when I was at home for Easter - but now that I have experienced this 'new look' for the Easter celebration, I think that it really has got down to the meaning of Christian worship. Don't you think, Peter, the 'devotional' attitude you mention can so easily be more emotional than anything else and have little to do with faith? Of course, in the Middle Ages the priests did all the 'job' of worship and everyone else was a sort of audience and so 'devotion' was all that was left to them. Now, today, we have recovered such an impressive amount of understanding of the New Testament writers' aim in giving us the 'gospel'. We know now that they were concerned to set out a proclamation of Jesus' own aim in his life and death. It doesn't seem that Jesus was concerned with getting people to become more spiritual or devotional. He was teaching and living out the new age of the kingdom of God so that all people could become partners with God in their lives. This led to his death at the hands of the Romans, but also to his vindication by God. So in our worship we come together to make this proclamation of the gospel that God has come to us in Christ and that we commit ourselves to follow with him. Our worship together is the place and time where we are seen to be his friends and partners with him in his work in the world. I find that this understanding of what we do is so tremendous that to become 'devotional' in the old way and to have replications in ceremonies of events of Jesus' life is so irrelevant and, perhaps, self-indulgent. Does that seem too simple, or perhaps even 'puritan', without all the ceremonial of the Middle Ages tacked on?"

"Oh, no," exclaimed Gladys, anxious to get a word in quickly, "we are all with you in what you say because here we are - we have all been through these past four days, exactly as you have put it : making our living response to Jesus in our worship and life here in Overbridge. Its just that I can't help reminiscing over the old days!"

"I agree," said Peter. "Tradition dies hard, you know, and we old 'uns have to give quite a bit of thought to anything which seems to us new fangled! But we are glad to go along this way now. It is full of real life for us."

In the pause that followed one could hear a buzz of talk coming from a nearby group where Paul and John were with some enthusiastic young folk. "You know," said Tony, "I used to get so bored with the hymns and sermons on Good Friday in the parish where I was born - three whole hours - and we were all supposed to be there for at least one hour. We were a lot of individuals being impregnated with devout thoughts about the death of Jesus. I could never understand how that sort of worship tied up with the whole commitment of Christian life in discipleship with Jesus. Because, if he has died and has been raised, then we don't want to go over that all again in a sort of introspective and psychological way, do we? What good is that to anyone 'out there' who needs to know that this great event has happened and that we are living in the new age?"

"Absolutely," said Paul. "Of course there have been quite an amazing amount of variation in the way Christians have commemorated the death of Jesus, beginning with the third century. And we know that at Jerusalem in the fourth century, there was quite a jamboree for a whole week in the days leading up to Easter. Because, of course, all the 'holy places' were still visible and humankind has always had a sort of penchant for visiting important places of the past and making them objects of devotion. Just as pieces of the cross were said to have circulated all over the world for people to do in Britain, for instance, what Christians were doing in Palestine - venerating the true cross and singing those moving chants called 'the reproaches'. There was certainly 'devotion' in all that kind of worship but I wonder - with Christine, whom I overheard on this topic - how the living faith which Jesus gave to his first disciples got so mixed up with these extraneous, extravagant rites which are very little different from what would have been seen in pagan religions in the fourth century?"

“Yes,” said Elizabeth, “surely the whole point of being a Christian is that our lives shall be changed because Jesus is, to put it crudely, alive, and that everything we do, particularly our worship, should hold together with our belief in Jesus as Lord, and that it is for real, as they say, and not a matter of play-acting or psychological recapitulation of what happened to Jesus. He gave his life ‘for us’. So let’s get on with being his disciples. I think our worship now at Easter is just great - ”

John exclaimed, “Anyone might be excused for thinking that we were planning the restructuring of worship everywhere in the Christian world! But of course others are not going to change to what we do here, just because we seem to have the backing of New Testament scholars, are they? I suppose that the changes which we can see in the history of the church, while they seem to us to be ‘movements’, at the time it was only a matter of a change of attitude in places quite isolated from each other. One has to allow for the movement of the Spirit to carry the truth along into other channels from the one we happen to be in. Meanwhile, I’m going to have a good holiday for the rest of today and tomorrow. What do you say, Gladys?” as John reached backward to the next table. “You’ve said it, John. And anyone is welcome to look in to our garden if it is fine - plenty of work to do there to get rid of any cobwebs you may be harbouring with this relaxed worship!”

