

**Maundy Thursday 2014**  
**St Barnabas, E17.**  
**Theme: Calvary**

**Warning: film spoiler...someone dies in *Calvary* (but then that is not entirely surprising given the name of the film).**

‘Jesus knew’, so John’s Gospel tells us, ‘that his hour had come to depart from this world...’. It cannot be easy to know that you are going to die. The gospels also tell us that after the meal we remember this evening, Jesus’s last meal with his disciples, that Jesus prayed to God: "Abba, Father," he cried out, "everything is possible for you. Please take this cup of suffering away from me..." He then said, "yet I want your will to be done, not mine." Jesus had a vocation. He knew his death had purpose. He had a choice and he chose to be obedient to God, even unto death.

Last night I watched the film *Calvary*, I think one of the best and one of the most challenging films I have ever seen. It begins with a priest in a confessional box. We learn later that this is Father James, a good priest serving in a beautiful landscape but in a challenging, socially deprived rural community in the east of Ireland. What happens in the confessional box is that Father James is told that on Sunday week, down on the beach, the person speaking to him will murder him.

It cannot be easy to be betrayed, not least by a friend or by someone you’ve tried to help or to whom you have been kind. Our Bible passage from John this evening tells us that ‘the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas...’ to betray Jesus. Judas, one of the trusted disciples; Judas, a bit of a radical, one of the Iscarii, a militant terrorist group seeking the violent overthrow of the Roman occupying forces; Judas,

whom Jesus risked making a disciple: Judas was the one to betray him.

In *Calvary* we do not know who it is that threatens Father James until the end of the film. The priest tells his bishop that he does know but that he will not reveal his identity, seemingly out of respect for the seal of the confessional. Early in the film Father James listens to his fellow priest complain about the people who have confessed to him and his fellow priest reveals details about their confessions which clearly breach the seal of the confessional. Later, his fellow priest leaves the parish and Father James tells him that he regards him as someone who lacks integrity and that he thinks that is about the worst thing he could say of a person.

Integrity is what Jesus has in facing his death bravely, in preparing not only himself but preparing his disciples for his death. He shares a meal with them. He washes their feet, showing that he does not regard them as servants but regards them as friends. He asks them to remember him, remembering his body every time they share in bread and his blood every time they share in wine. He suggests that they can continue to be united not only with him but with one another when they share in his body and blood, that they can in some way be the very body of Jesus, continuing to be active in the world. And he tells them that the key to all they do is to not only love God but to show the world that they love one another.

Integrity is what Father James has in *Calvary* as he journeys through the week, of what threatens to be the last week of his life, as he approaches the Sunday on which his potential killer has earmarked for his death. The threat becomes more real throughout the week, not least when the church is burnt to the ground and when he finds his beloved labrador with its throat

cut in the garden. It is a hard, hard week for Father James as he deals with many difficult pastoral problems. It is a week in which he is visited by his daughter, as we discover he became a priest after his wife's death and has difficult conversation with his daughter following her attempted suicide. They discuss how she felt abandoned twice, first when her mum died and then when her dad became a priest. It is a difficult week as he tries to give others an opportunity to show remorse for their wrongdoings and receive God's forgiveness, as he is taunted for his faith by some of the villagers and even beaten up by the landlord of the local pub.

How would you react if you were given a sign that to be faithful to your vocation you had to look death in the face? How would I react? Would we run away? What might be the circumstances in which our faith might be so tested that we knew we had no choice but to deny our vocation or to face death? Maybe it seems an odd question but is a question many Christians have faced throughout history and which many face in the world today where they live in places where Christians are persecuted. We have Koreans with us this evening and we are mindful of the persecution of Korean Christians. It is a question for many living in places where the struggle for justice brings risk and yes risk even of death. We have Filipinos with us this evening and we are mindful of those murdered for opposing various outside interventions in indigenous areas of that country. How would you react if you were given a sign that to be faithful to your vocation you had to look death in the face?

Death is not the last word for Christians but that does not mean it is easy to face it or to embrace it. And it is not easy for others to cope with it, the ones left behind. Father James does face his death. He is tempted not to. On the Saturday he nearly boards a plane to Dublin to escape the parish and escape the risk. But on the Sunday morning he says his

prayers and he walks to the beach, where after a while he is approached and we discover the identity of the one who threatened to kill him. He pulls out a gun and there on the beach he shoots Father James in the chest. The bleeding priest, even then, says it is not too late for the one who's shot him to stop, but the person takes his gun and shoots Father James in the head, blows his brains out, shoots him plain dead.

There was no more speech in the film. It ended in silence, a silence respected by the audience as we quietly left the cinema. But the death was not the last scene. We are shown images of all the people we meet in the film, all touched in different ways by the Father James. We are shown images of the empty places associated with the priest. And then we are shown his killer receiving a visit in prison from Father James daughter, and a tear is her eye as she seeks some form of healing, some moment of redemption not only for her but also for her father's killer. We learnt earlier that she not received forgiveness from her father but also forgave him. And we also know from the start of the film that Father James' killer was a victim of horrific abuse as a child at the hands of another priest.

There is no resurrection without the death of Jesus. And neither is there any hope beyond the grave without him dying on the cross. It is by the death of Jesus that sin is defeated, that evil is never the last word, that there is always the opportunity for us and even the vilest offender to receive forgiveness because of the abundance of God's love. And there is no death of Jesus without the last supper, no witness to the resurrection other than by those first disciples who, even though they fled, even though they denied him, then had the integrity to live and even to die for Jesus so that the truth of God's love might be known throughout the world. We cannot get to Calvary without this supper and we are taught

to live post-Calvary as those for whom nothing matters more than the world knowing that because God loves us, we too can share his love with one another, even to the ends of the earth.

**Steven Saxby, April 2014.**