

Holy Week 2021 Maundy Thursday
Address given by The Reverend John Summers
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The following events are recounted in a judgment of the Queen's Bench Division of the High Court given in London in 1884.

Dudley and Stephens, both sailors, and the deceased, a boy aged between seventeen and eighteen, were cast away in a storm on the high seas, and compelled to put into an open boat. The boat was drifting on the ocean, more than 1,000 miles from land. On their eighteenth day adrift, when they had been seven days without food and five without water, Dudley proposed to Stephens that lots should be cast for who should be put to death to save the rest. However, they later decided that it would be better to kill the boy so that their lives should be saved. On the twentieth day Dudley, with the consent of Stephens, killed the boy (who was asleep) with a knife. Dudley and Stephens ate the body over the course of four days. At the time of the killing there was no ship in sight nor any reasonable prospect of salvation. Dudley and Stephens were rescued by a passing vessel four days later and placed under arrest for murder.

It was determined that the men would most likely have died had they not eaten the boy. It was also found that the boy would probably have died in any event before the rescuers arrived and would have died before the two men.

The task for the court in England was to consider whether this was a case of murder. More precisely, the issue was whether the exceptional pressure of the circumstances offered Dudley and Stephens any defence to that charge. Was necessity an answer to this most serious indictment?

The Lord Chief Justice, Lord Coleridge, held that it did not. He said, "To preserve one's life is generally speaking a duty, but it may be the plainest and the highest duty to sacrifice it." He approached the legal question before him as essentially one of morality (this is remarkable as this is not something that judges normally do). He said, in summary, "it is enough in a Christian country to remind ourselves of the Great Example whom we profess to follow". The two sailors were convicted of murder and both were sentenced to death.

What would you have done had you been in the men's shoes? Would you have surrendered yourself to death or would you have killed and eaten the boy as the only way in which you could survive? More generally one might frame the issue like this: is there a moral obligation to be selfless? If so, what is its extent? How would life in community look without selflessness?

This evening we recall the words of Jesus at supper with his friends: a new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another, as I have loved you. Much of Christ's farewell discourses in John are a meditation on love as the image of the divine dance, not only the dance between the persons of the Trinity but those disciples drawn into it through faith in Jesus. And this all culminates in that totemic statement of Chapter 15, "Greater love has no man than this, than he lay down his life for his friends." It was no doubt to that statement that Lord Coleridge was referring when he spoke, in his judgment, of the Great Example which we must follow.

Jesus' instructions about love are easy to repeat. Love one another. Love those who hate you. Be ready to lay down your life for your friends. But how many of us are prone to whisper to ourselves that, nice as the sentiments are, these are impossible standards to live by in real life? Would we really lay down our life for our friends? Don't we treat the love commandments as a bit of an intellectual parlour game: high flown ideals but not something we should beat ourselves up about if we fall short in real life.

This struggle - between hearing the commandment and trying to live it - is the Gethsemane moment. We can all remember moments of silent despair when we know what is asked of us but we want the cup to pass away. For Christ, the Gethsemane moment was but a night, and one that he could resolve with "thy will be done." For us, it must last a lifetime.

It ought to comfort us in the struggle that for all its difficulty, we as a society instinctively hold to Christ's high standard. Every Remembrance Sunday as we gather and say, "Greater Love has no Man than this: that he lay down his Life for his Friends." The present Dalai Lama has said, "It is under the greatest adversity that there exists the greatest potential for doing good, both for oneself and others." Lord Coleridge himself made a similar observation in his judgment, "We are often compelled to set up standards we cannot reach ourselves, and to lay down rules which we could not ourselves satisfy."

This passion tide we might make “thy will be done” our motto. Not because it provides a glib answer to the challenges of our vocation but for the very opposite reason: it accepts head on, in the words of Jesus in the garden, the crisis we inhabit and our reliance on God’s providence and grace to see us through it. These are words - thy will be done - which do not shirk choices but accept them despite our weakness, knowing that success will be fragmented and imperfect and that more often we will call on God’s love rather than show it. But we will endeavour, for ‘thy will be done’.

A couple of foot notes to end with ... (1) In due course, the Crown exercised the prerogative of mercy, and the sentences of death were commuted to 6 months’ imprisonment. (2) When the brother of the boy who had been killed entered the court and saw his brother’s killers in the dock, he walked straight up to them. Standing before them, he extended his arm, and shook both their hands. “Love one another, as I have loved you.”