14 April 2019: Choral Matins
Palm Sunday
Zechariah 9:9–12, 1 Corinthians 2:1–12
The Revd Canon Graham Ward, Regius Professor of Divinity
‘Living in God’

We stand on the cusp of a descent into Holy Week and the exposure of the dark violations deep in human nature that takes place on Thursday night and Friday morning later this week. We are here not to commemorate historical events taking place in a foreign land nearly two millennia ago. Our liturgical calendar returns us constantly to these events because they are more than historical. They are events hidden in what St Paul, in our second lesson this morning, calls “God’s hidden wisdom, his secret purpose framed from the very beginning to bring us to our full glory.” Paul begins his exploration of this wisdom by addressing the members of the congregation at Corinth with a proviso: these words will only mean anything to those “who are ripe” – those who have some maturity in their faith. And we need to understand what he is getting at here because as human beings we don’t like to feel excluded and we don’t like to feel inferior. We do not want then to be identified as the green and not yet ready, but the ripe and prepared – prepared to enter more deeply into “God’s hidden wisdom”. And this sounds so much as if there is a spiritual elite who know more about God than the rest of us; St Paul being among them. It’s as if there’s a general invitation to a gathering and then a few who are really in the know whisper a closet invitation to one or two to step aside, and enter the inner circle. It all sounds very Da Vinci Code – words for the illuminati. And I don’t think that’s what Paul means at all and exclusion is not in the nature of the God we have come to worship. All are invited; all are welcome; all have access.

But each of us has lived life differently; we have experienced different things, in different places, with different people. This is what makes us unique and replaceable. No one has lived my life, has my memories, but me. That living, all those varied experiences - the people, the events, the friends, the family, the work I do and the work I have done - have shaped me. And into that thick matting of time and circumstance is also my Christian faith – I believe in God. I believe in our Lord, Jesus Christ. I believe in the Holy Spirit.
As Christians we are being formed in God according to His likeness in Jesus Christ. That formation is what distinguishes those who are not yet ready from those who are prepared. Ready for what? Prepared for what? To receive more deeply God’s revelation of God’s self. “The Spirit explores everything, even the depths of God’s own nature,” Paul tells us. What we receive is not ‘hidden’ in the sense that God keeps it from us; keeps it only for those high-ranking holy ones. Sainthood is not a career-path. What is hidden is because we can’t yet receive it; we are the reason it’s hidden not God. God reveals everything of Godself in liberal bestowal – that’s what the cross this coming Friday means. Nothing is held back. God is pinned there and totally vulnerable. The question is not about the gift and the giving – it’s about the reception and the receiving. When we are ready we will receive; we will hear; we will enter more deeply into “God’s hidden wisdom.”

I don’t know how green or ripe you are. I don’t know how green and ripe I am. There isn’t some external scale of sanctity, some map of holiness, by which we can measure where we are in our faith or track our progress. Most, if not all of us, are lost in our faith – and that’s how it should be, because we have to be formed in that faith by God, by living in God, towards God. That is, by being faithful, and constantly trying to see beyond or beneath what is there to be seen or making meaningful events in our lives that sometimes don’t appear at all meaningful. And that means walking in the invisible since neither God nor Jesus Christ nor the Holy Spirit are visible in the way Marmite sandwiches are visible. We grope in the faith towards some limited understanding that we will always see in a mirror darkly. This isn’t weakness; it’s wisdom because it’s a constant appeal to grace for grace. We can’t grasp God; we have to learn how to allow ourselves to be grasped by God and not be afraid. To let go and not let fear overwhelm us. There’s a great lyric in a song by Sam Smith that opens the James Bond film, Spectre: “If I risk it all, will you break my fall?” The lyrics are even better in the song Suzanne by Leonard Cohen:

And Jesus was a sailor
When he walked upon the water
And he spent a long time watching
From his lonely wooden tower

And when he knew for certain
Only drowning men could see him
He said: "All men will be sailors then"
Until the sea shall free them"

But he himself was broken
Long before the sky would open
Forsaken, almost human
He sank beneath your wisdom like a stone

And you want to travel with him
And you want to travel blind
And you think maybe you’ll trust him
For he’s touched your perfect body with his mind

We stand on the cusp of a descent into Holy Week and the exposure of the dark violences deep in human nature that takes place on Thursday night and Friday morning later this week. Don’t displace these violences. Don’t project them on to someone else. Don’t look on the priestly hierarchy and the Roman authorities with horror and revulsion, believing you or I incapable of doing what they did to an innocent man, a good man, Jesus Christ. Being formed in God is also coming to terms with our own dark violences. That is the road to ripening. The hidden wisdom of God doesn’t just lie in the empty tomb on Easter Sunday; it’s also there in the cross. It is the foundation of our hope; a hope that is written into us and cannot be erased – though it can, at times be paralyzed. As Paul puts it, quoting the Jewish Scriptures: the “things beyond our seeing, things beyond our hearing, things beyond our imagining, all prepared by God for those who love him.”