28 April 2019: Said Matins with Hymns
The First Sunday after Easter
Exodus 12:1–13, 1 Peter 1:3–12
Canon Professor Carol Harrison, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity
‘De Profundis’

‘Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord; Lord hear my voice’

De profundis – out of the depths – out of the depths of darkness, sin, suffering and death – we raised our voices during Holy Week in psalms and lamentations; prayers of intercession; sighs of longing, moans of guilt, groans of confession. We raised our voices, or rather, our voices rose - as involuntarily and as tears, in response to the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. When we were lost for words before his ineffable suffering – a suffering so profound it could not be fathomed – our voices rose. Canon Foot spoke movingly of depictions of our Lord’s passion; the choir sang with such power and beauty that words gave way to wonder and tears; we read the Scripture, meditated on the passion… until everything fell silent, our hearts were stilled, and we knelt before our Lord’s body, placed on the altar of repose on Maundy Thursday.

De profundis – out of the depths – out of the depths of shimmering light, joy, new life – we raised our voices during Holy Week in psalms and canticles; prayers of adoration; shouts of joy, whoops of delight, cries of victory. We raised our voices, or rather, our voices rose – as involuntarily as laughter, in repeated alleluias. When we were lost for words before Christ’s mighty resurrection – a breaking of the bonds of sin and death so decisive that it could not be fathomed – our voices rose. Canon Foot spoke with anticipation of the glorious resurrection of our Lord from the dead; the choir sang with such resonant rejoicing that our hearts soared; the organ danced with loud drums; we proclaimed the Gospel, sang the exultet; we rang bells, blew whistles, shook rattles, banged the pews… until everything fell silent, our hearts were stilled, and we knelt before our Lord’s body, to receive the first communion of Easter on Easter Eve, with those who had been newly baptised and confirmed.
De profundis – out of the depths – out of the depths, then, our voices rose, first in lamentation, then in rejoicing. But my experience of Holy Week wasn’t quite so clear cut: rejoicing kept breaking through the lamentation; and lamentation broke though the rejoicing. It was when Tracy the donkey gave a raucous, loud eeeh oorrr during the Hosanna – Hosanna to the King of David – on Palm Sunday, that I began to think about how voices rise, explode, and sound forth at all sorts of unexpected moments. Tracey’s Eeeh Orr was joined by Canon Robin Gibbons’ suppressed snorts of laughter when we looked up on Holy Tuesday to find that the curtain covering our crucified Lord on the altar had fallen off and he appeared to be held to the cross with the Sellotape that was left behind; by Canon Graham Ward’s cow bell, when he picked it up off the floor in advance of the bishop’s proclamation of the resurrection, but couldn’t stop it ringing as we all waited in what was meant to be silent anticipation; by the choir boys coming forward to sing the soprano arias in the St John Passion, filling the Cathedral with sublime sound, even as they called upon us to weep at having killed our Lord.

Joy and woe are woven fine, the Bishop told us, quoting William Blake on Easter Day – and so they were. As Easter week began, I felt like a small child who had to go to school but was full of expectation for the party that was to come later in the day. I found it difficult to settle on the long journey to Easter Day; difficult to be fully immersed in the drama of the passion; difficult to focus my prayers on guilt and lamentation; difficult to remain in the darkness. Expectation, anticipation, joy, light kept surfacing through the pain. I was in the present, remembering the past, and eagerly anticipating the future. How could I remain still and be fully in the moment? I don’t think I’m alone in this. It is how we all lead our lives, most of the time. The tension can be a transformative one. Being in the present, remembering the past, anticipating the future and letting it transform our lives is, in fact, what we do in prayer; in Holy Week; in each liturgy; in baptism and confirmation – and when it is centred on our Lord Jesus Christ – remembering his life and passion; following them in the present; anticipating his promise of eternal life, then we are transformed. This is the source of our faith, our hope and our love. We find the same tensions and movement in the Psalms, where the voice of the Psalmist is often first raised from the depths of suffering and tribulation, in tears and lament; then in recollection of God’s actions, in cries of hope; then in songs of joy and praise for God’s mercy and loving-kindness. There isn’t one voice, but a cacophony of voices, raised in the midst of this life.
But there were also moments in Holy Week when this cacophony of voices was silenced and stilled. On Maundy Thursday it was the silence and stillness of the darkness and waiting, as our Lord’s sacred body rested on the altar of repose. On Good Friday it was the silence and stillness of the earth and of his blessed mortal body, having given up his life on the cross; On Holy Saturday it was the silence and stillness of the tomb; On Easter Day it was the deafening silence and stunned stillness of the joy of the resurrection, which could not be contained by words.

I left many services during Holy Week lost for words; in silence, wanting to hold on to the stillness that the worship had led me to – especially after the John Passion on Wednesday; the vigil on Maundy Thursday; the Good Friday liturgy and listening; after the great mysteries of the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday. I wanted these moments to last. They seemed to hold what was most profound, most meaningful about what we were doing. They plumbed the depths and instead of a voice, silent awe and stilled wonder rose in my heart and soul. I didn’t want to return to voices, to noise, to words; I wanted the silence and stillness to be eternal. But then I couldn’t resist the cry – the repeated cry of alleluia, Christ is Risen - which rose from the depths and broke forth in resonant rejoicing on Easter Day.

And yet even that joy was tinged with woe as we heard the news of the bombings in Sri Lanka; the Christians who had been killed even as they celebrated the resurrection.

But still we shouted: Christ is Risen! Joy and woe are woven fine because in His death and resurrection he holds them together in Himself.

As the Bishop prayed as he marked the Paschal Candle:

Christ yesterday and today,
The beginning and the end,
Alpha and Omega,
All time belongs to him,
And all ages;
To him be glory and power,
Through every age and for ever.

May we always shout from the depths; the depths of joy and woe: Alleluia, Christ is Risen!