

6th April 2025 – LENT: The Rest is Worship (5) – ‘Rest for our bodies’ (Heb 2:14-18, John 4:1-8)

In 1999 something new happened in London’s Trafalgar Square which hadn’t been seen for more than 150 years – a new statue was put on the empty Fourth Plinth. It had originally been intended for a statue of William IV, but funds ran out, and so the plinth had remained empty since 1841. However, thanks to a letter from Prue Leith to the Evening Standard in 1994 – yes, she did do other things before the Great British Bake-Off – a campaign began to fill the plinth. So, in 1998 it was finally decided to have temporary pieces of cultural or political significance.

The very first caused quite a stir: it was a statue by Mark Wallinger called *Ecce Homo*, and it was a statue of Jesus, recalling the time he appeared before Pilate just before his death, who presented him to the crowds, shouting: ‘*Ecce Homo!*’ ‘Behold the man!’

I lived in London at the time – in fact I went to see the statue a few times – and it generated a huge amount of comment. A lot of Christians actually thought it disrespectful: Jesus looks very normal – a normal height, normal build – just a man, in other words. Exactly as the artist intended: Wallinger said in an interview at the time: ‘Essentially, I wanted to make a piece that had Christ as a human being, at a point of the story where he isn’t a deity, he’s just a guy being handed over to the lynch mob. I wanted something that reflected back on issues to do with power. And I wanted him to be life-size because, well, He was made in our image.’

Doesn’t sound very un-Christian, does it? I wonder what the Christians who objected to Jesus looking normal were really objecting to? I think the debate touches on something profoundly important as to who we *really* think Jesus is, or was. You see, **there’s been a strain of thinking throughout Christian history that doesn’t like to think of Jesus as too human.** Yes, he was born, yes he lived with a family and walked around Galilee and talked to people, and yes he felt pain, especially when he died – but he wasn’t really *like* us, was he? He was divine and so he can’t really have been a real, normal human... he was sort of pretending, so he could fit in with us.

I think this is actually what a lot of people think, deep down. And there’s a word for it – and that word is heresy. Come on, Matt, that sounds a bit strong. Surely we’re allowed a bit of slack on this one? Does it really matter? The thing is, the answer to that question is: a thousand times, yes! It absolutely matters. **The humanity of Jesus is fundamental to our gospel – as fundamental as his divinity.** Jesus has to be both fully divine and fully human. Unless he’s divine he can’t undertake our rescue mission at all; but unless he’s human he can’t take our place and win our freedom.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews makes this very point: Jesus ‘shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.’ The author goes on to say: ‘For this reason, he had to be made like them, fully human in every way.’ Note: not just some ways, or lots of ways – but every way. A real, flesh and blood, normal person. Why? ‘...in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.’

Ecce homo! A real human – just like us, fully human in every way.

Now why am I labouring this point for a talk about ‘rest for our bodies’? Well, **if we’re ever going to understand the value of rest, we need to get our heads round a fundamental point: Jesus enjoyed rest, too;** in fact, he needed to rest, because he was a normal human, just like us. Look at our gospel story – he gets to a small town at midday and he’s thirsty and tired. He sits down and asks for a drink. And yes, the encounter with the woman at the well is one of those iconic gospel stories that has a deep, spiritual meaning, and we usually skip past the opening verses – but today, we’re going to stop and notice them. In fact, we wouldn’t have all the ‘spiritual’ stuff without them! Jesus is tired and thirsty (and probably hot and sweaty too) and he needs a rest and drink.

Throughout history, we create this inhuman Jesus, who isn't really like us at all. And worse than that, it usually leads to a theology which doesn't take care of our bodies. In this worldview, the only stuff that really matters is 'spiritual' – the material world is either meaningless or bad, and should be avoided or hated. We don't pay attention to our bodies, because those are dirty and corrupt – we just use them till they wear out – probably quicker than they would have done otherwise, but that's a good thing, because being burnt out is a sign of how spiritual we are, how hard we're working for the Lord!

The funny thing is, apart from making us miserable, that kind of approach doesn't really make us more spiritual. Instead of channelling our physicality in healthy and constructive ways, we repress it, and it usually explodes in anger or lust or binges or something else we haven't paid attention to.

So, before we offer a few thoughts on the theme of rest, let's acknowledge the bigger, deeper question – your body matters to Jesus, because he had a real body too. He was a real, flesh-and-blood Saviour. He gets it. We are whole, integrated beings: body, soul and spirit. It's not just the soul and spirit bit that matters, it's the body bit too. After all, each of our bodies is a temple where God dwells – it's worth giving it a clean and tidy every so often.

So, **we start by embracing the value of our bodies.** Once we get our heads around that, then the idea of taking care of it, not just by not smoking or taking drugs or whatever, but also by resting well, becomes something that's worth looking at. Section 3 of the Lent book has lots of great ideas, which I can do no more than briefly reflect on today, so here's a few simple pointers:

First, rest should be regular. Don't just rest when you can't go on any more. Take rest regularly. We've already looked at the value of Sabbath – but it applies to rest during each day as well as longer periods like holidays and other forms of time off.

Second, rest should be enough. If you're permanently exhausted, with no other medical reason, then you're not taking enough rest. There's no magic cure, apart from a different work/rest balance. People will have varying levels of what constitutes enough – but you'll know if it's enough for you by how you feel after you've done it!

Third, rest should be whatever is restful for you. There are different forms of rest, including active and passive rest. Rest is not just sitting around on the sofa, although lots of people find that a part of their diet of rest. Many people rest by gardening, or playing sport, or walking in nature. So, no sermon can give you a definitive guide – it needs to fit with your personality and life-stage. But if you've taken time off, and you don't feel rested, then what you call 'rest' hasn't been restful – and you need to look at that!

Finally, rest includes God. Perhaps because of my job, I'm as bad at this as anyone – when I have time off, I'm tempted switch off from my faith, because it's so much a part, not just of my life, but my *working* life. But let's never forget that it's Jesus who invites us to enter his rest. Rest is a foretaste of what being with the Lord forever looks like; I'm sure there will be useful activity in heaven, but ultimately, rest is part of the divine design – so it works better if the designer has a role in it!

Ecce homo! Behold the man! As I close, I invite us to do just that. **To look at Jesus**, who gets tired and thirsty and sits down for a drink and a rest. Jesus, who invites us to enter his rest. Jesus who understands our human bodies and needs better than we do. Jesus, the source and the goal of our rest. May the Lord grant us all rest for our bodies, when we need it, how we need it – and ultimately, for his glory. None of us can pour from an empty cup. Amen.