**HOLY FRIDAY VESPERS**

Some of you may know from the news that we are waiting for a space ship to be launched which will reach its destination in 8 years time and send back pictures from Jupiter and its moons. In other missions a permanent residence is to be built on the moon and Mars is being explored as a possible destination for man, maybe our grandchildren, if water can be found. These facts and advances in the scientific world open up the realms of our vision of the universe and the history and development of the world and man’s place in it. One of the questions it may lead us to consider is what is the most important event in the history and life of mankind since his beginning. A number of inspired answers from different realms can be advanced but I would like to suggest that the best answer is right in front of us now: The death of our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Throughout Lent on most Sundays and yesterday we have heard the long anaphora of St Basil’s Liturgy before the consecration of the gifts. It outlines the history of mankind at a spiritual level: how God creates man with the potential to do good and is given every good thing but is tricked into directing his attention towards evil. He leaves paradise, symbolised as a garden, and falls into the greater sin and iniquity of murder and acts of aggression in its many ugly and brutal forms towards his fellow man. He despises God’s laws which are made to protect and advance his progress and rejects him. God sends messengers, the prophets, to warn them of the consequences of their actions and to plead with them to return to the paths which he has in his love laid out for them. But they despise, reject and kill the prophets. The evils which befall them are meant to guide them back to living properly but that does not work either. Finally, God sends his son, who demonstrates the love of the Father through his teachings and healings of the many who come to him. Ultimately, he knows that his purpose on earth is to die for mankind in order to restore the bond which has been broken between God and Man. He obediently takes on this role and is despised, rejected, beaten and crucified shamefully and innocently as a common criminal.

So, we stand now at the tomb of the one who has been sent from above to save the world. This sacrifice holds good or is valid for all people, for all possible times and for all possible worlds. We know from Lazarus, four days dead, celebrated last Saturday, as we wait at the tomb that this is not the end. But this time gives us an opportunity to meditate on God’s unfathomable love of for us in its many forms and how as members of the human race we have participated in the sins of the world which by his grace He has taken away. Glory to God!

***14th April 2023 Oxford***