

Passion Sunday Sermon

29th March 2020

It's Passion Sunday and our gospel reading today from St Matthew gives us a stark account of Jesus' death on the cross. So why are we thinking about this today, why this week? After all we will be celebrating Palm Sunday next week, with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, followed by the events of Holy Week, before commemorating the Crucifixion on Good Friday.

Well I can think of a couple of reasons. The first for me was simply practical. As an adolescent, church was for Sundays; I might well attend three times most Sundays but it was not part of my tradition to go to church on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, or even Christmas Day for that matter. School always broke up for the Easter holidays on the Thursday, and Good Friday was a lazy day, complete with hot cross buns and then fish for dinner, the shops and most other things were shut anyway. I was fortunate that I went to a church primary school, and even in the county secondary school we had Christian Assemblies and our religious education was for the most part Biblical, so I was quite aware that Jesus was betrayed, arrested, tried and finally crucified. I was

culturally prepared for the wonder of the Resurrection, and the joyous celebration of Easter Sunday. Much time has passed; it's a different world, and Easter is all about chocolate eggs and bunnies. Even for some Christians today, possibly by tradition, or by habit or more likely by the pressures of a 24/7 world, Sunday is the only time that feel that they can commit to worship with others and learning about God. Our education system can no longer be relied on to fill in the gaps in our knowledge of God. So reflecting on Jesus' death this week and reading St Luke's Passion narrative next week will help us all prepare for Easter.

Secondly, this is the Fifth Sunday of Lent. Starting with Ash Wednesday we have spent 4 weeks, thinking about the ways which we have failed to live our lives as God would have wanted us to. We know that we have fallen short of His standards, and need His forgiveness. In short, we know that we have sinned in what we have thought, said and done, and in what we have failed to do. The same is true for all humanity. So now it is time to change our focus and look at what Jesus did, to learn about and come to accept for ourselves God's solution for the whole world, to the problem caused by sin.

From our reading we are told that it was the ninth hour, Jesus had been hanging on that cross for six hours, which certainly seems like a long

time to me, but in reality some people lasted days. This was a shameful, painful, prolonged method of torture and execution. Jesus cried out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” Did the weight of the world’s evil, which converged on Him, blot out the light of God’s Love for the first and only time? But even in His forsakenness, Jesus remained obedient to God’s will and with a cry of triumph took on the sin of the whole world, yes all of it, including yours and mine. He took everything that separates us from God into the darkness of death with Him, and dragged it to its destruction. This was the event that changed the world for ever.

In our Parish Eucharist service, so often we are reminded of what Jesus death means for us; before the confession; “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, Jesus Christ, to save us from our sins.” In the confession itself we say; “Jesus Christ died for us” and in the Gloria we sing; “Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world”. Then in the creed we say; “for us and our salvation he came down from heaven, he became incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and was made man,” followed by, “for our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried,” to make sure that we remember. From Eucharistic prayer H; “in Christ you shared our life, that we might live in him and he in us”, and we reply “he opened his arms of

love upon the cross,” followed by, “and made for all the perfect sacrifice for sin”, and “this is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins”. References to Jesus’ death occur throughout our liturgy, it is central to our faith, but do we pause as we say these words to consider what they really mean?

Passion Sunday and Passiontide challenge us to do just that.

It has been said that “Christians have been more concerned to stand under the cross than to understand it.” As you are receiving this sermon in written form and in the present circumstances may have time to consider this further, I’ve included a couple of thoughts to ponder.

Jesus was fully human, intimately associated with us, and thinking about the way that St Paul in his letter to the Colossians, describes Jesus as “the head of the body, the church;” He is actually part of who we are together, so it is a logical step to accept that He could take the responsibility and the penalty for our sin. God’s law, justice, love and mercy are all satisfied by this explanation, but we need to recognise the price that has been paid on our behalf and allow ourselves to be transformed by that reality.

“This is the very heart of the gospel; God chooses death, rejection, suffering for Himself, and life, hope and salvation for us.” Or put another way, “the cross of Christ represents the place and time in which God, the righteous judge, makes known his judgement of sinful humanity and simultaneously takes that judgement on Himself.” In this explanation God’s love and justice are satisfied. Human beings are not simply bystanders but we clearly have a choice as to whether accept the salvation, life and hope that have been won for us.

Lord Jesus, help us to live in the reality of what you have done for us, and allow it to transform the whole of our lives. Amen.

Revd Dr Tina Dixon, 29 March 2020.