



## Revd Ro's Reflection on The Fifth Sunday of Lent

### Passion Sunday

Hebrews 5. 5-10

John 12. 20-23

Last week was Mothering Sunday and Refreshment Sunday. We had a joyful day here. I celebrated Holy Communion with mum and later we enjoyed our Simnel cake! Today is a solemn day, it is known as Passion Sunday. We turn towards the cross and Jesus' last two weeks before his crucifixion, it is known as Passiontide. In some churches it is the tradition to veil all church ornaments and crosses on Passion Sunday until the beginning of the Easter Vigil.

St. John tells of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem for the festival of Passover in chapter 12 of his gospel. The gospel ends at chapter 21 with the resurrection appearances. So John devotes some ten chapters to the final days of Jesus' life and his resurrection. This shows its centrality to John's gospel. Our reading for this morning comes almost immediately after the entry into Jerusalem which we will focus on next week on Palm Sunday.

I remember a former priest at Wigginton preaching a sermon many years ago now. It was on this passage from John's gospel. He told how he had been invited to preach at another church. Imagine his dismay when he got into the pulpit to find a note which read, 'Sir we wish to see Jesus.' That of course is any preacher's brief if you think about it. I remember quoting it some years later with a wry smile saying it would now read sir or madam!

If you remember I dealt with the calling of Philip in my Reflection for Epiphany 2. It is after Jesus' calling of Andrew and Peter.

'The next day Jesus goes to Galilee, he finds Philip and says simply, 'Follow me.' There is no question, Philip follows in faith. Once more we have a specific detail, <sup>44</sup>'Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.' Just as Andrew did he goes out and calls someone to Jesus. <sup>45</sup>'Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the

prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' There is no doubt about his message, just as there was no doubt about Andrew's. Both state clearly that they have 'found the Messiah.'

Philip and the other disciples have followed Jesus faithfully throughout his three years of his ministry. They have as yet no idea that Judas will betray him and them. Philip has heard Peter say, 'You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.' He has followed Jesus into Jerusalem as the crowds waved their branches but here it is not the Jews but some Greeks who say to him, 'Sir we wish to see Jesus.' The fact that they are Greeks is very important. These people are gentiles. The message is expanding to include all people. We remember Jesus came into the world to save the world. That is every single person who believes in him. Later St. Paul will become the 'apostle to the gentiles' and the mission will be formalised.

Notice Philip goes to Andrew and the pair of them tell Jesus, and yet there is no response from him about the people who are waiting. In fact there is no response about the Greeks full stop. Instead he answers<sup>23</sup> 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.'

This is vitally important; we remember how when Mary addresses Jesus at the wedding at Cana he answers somewhat cryptically, 'My hour has not yet come.' Now his meaning is crystal clear. Now he is to walk the road to Calvary, now he is to do God's will in love for humanity.

We remember his words in chapter 16 of Matthews's gospel when he says after Peter's acclamation that he is the Messiah. 'Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?'

Jesus next words echo these,'

<sup>24</sup>'Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.'

Any gardener or farmer will tell you that growing is about faith. One of the assemblies I used to do at Flaxhill was about just this. I used to take various seeds and show them to the youngsters then I would show the fruit and vegetables which grew from them and they had great fun matching them up. They were always dismayed by the fact it would be at least three months before the crop could be harvested and that between the planting of the tiny seed and the harvest there was a great deal of toil. Looking at that seed and the fact that it had to die to bring new life was a miracle. Jesus' analogy is a good one. For him to bring new life to the people there is only one way. That is to take on pain, death and evil and defeat them once and for all at Calvary, 'but if it dies, it bears much fruit.'

This analogy applies to his followers they need to, 'die to sin and turn to Christ.' The old ways must be put to death and they must turn to be cleansed in the waters of baptism and metaphorically be raised to new life with him. We looked in detail last week at Paul's words to the Colossians which illustrated just this point.

For some of them it meant not only putting to death the old ways, the unacceptable behaviour they were used to. For others it meant literally following in Jesus' footsteps and being killed for their faith. That is not the end, for those who die in the faith of Christ will be raised to new life in him.

<sup>25</sup>Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. <sup>26</sup>Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.'

Jesus' words are not equivocal. The time has come to speak out, there is not much time left. Everyone who chooses to follow Jesus must be left in no doubt as to the fact that it will be a tough road. It was true then and it always has been true. We are fortunate to live in a country where we are free to practise our faith. For some in other countries following Jesus means persecution and even death, 'Take up your cross and follow me,' still holds true in a literal sense. Others may have to put up with subtler hurts and bullying. But for those who follow Jesus, who do their best to the end, there are the full promises of God Jesus won for them and for us.

Jesus knows about crucifixion, so would everyone else. The Romans made no secret of it. Those who were executed were killed in public places as an example to others to keep toeing the line. Obey us, the conquerors, or else was the warning. Jesus is walking inexorably towards a horrible death. He shares our humanity and that means revulsion and fear at pain and death. Sometimes just a few words in the gospels say so much. I am thinking of words like 'Jesus wept' and here <sup>27</sup> 'Now my soul is troubled.' That takes us to Gethsemane and the agony in the garden and Jesus words "I am deeply grieved, even to death," Matthew 26.38. The reality of Jesus' troubled spirit, the depth of his fear and agony is seen in these words. The reality of a human being facing a vile and inhuman execution is so powerful and yet the words of obedience follow almost at once, 'My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.'

Now in our passage for today Jesus says 'And what should I say—"Father, save me from this hour?"' No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. <sup>28</sup>Father, glorify your name.'

Jesus turns his face resolutely to fulfilling his final mission, his hour has come now. A few weeks ago when I dealt with Jesus' calling of Nathaniel I spoke of 'thin places' in the gospels where the veil between heaven and earth is transparent. Here is one of those places, as at the baptism of Jesus there is the voice from heaven that calls; these are times of affirmation and strengthening. The voice answers Jesus,

'Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.'

The crowd think it is thunder, both Jesus and we know it is the voice of God. God speaks to Jesus at this critical time. His Father walks with him on his road to Calvary. <sup>30</sup>Jesus answered, 'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. <sup>31</sup>Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.'

Remember the Jews are waiting for a Messiah; Jesus has been welcomed into the city to the words 'Hosanna to the Son of David,' what kind of Messiah? Was Jesus the warrior king who would drive out the hated Romans, who would vanquish his enemies with the sword? Absolutely not; he will defeat evil and cruelty wherever it lurks. He will establish God's rule of peace, justice and compassion. He will be a king who will bring in God's way, God's new creation.

<sup>32</sup>And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' <sup>33</sup>He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.'

The path he will tread will mean crucifixion but he will 'draw all people' to himself. In that way Jesus does refer back to those Greeks. Greek would have been spoken throughout so much of the civilised world. In a way the Greeks stand for all gentiles. The death he is to die is of course crucifixion when he is lifted up on the cross for all.

In Eucharistic prayer B it says, 'He opened wide his arms upon the cross and put an end to death by dying for us: and revealed the resurrection by rising to new life, so he fulfilled your will and won for you a holy people.'

This really sums it up, and is reminiscent of Jesus' own words here <sup>32</sup>'And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' 'Opened wide his arms' is reminiscent of the welcoming hug of love.

As it says in the passage from Hebrews set for this morning 'he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him,'

The passage links with the gospel passage and is very apt for Passion Sunday because it, like the gospel reading, is dealing with Jesus' self-giving love acted out at Calvary. It links with the passage from Philippians 2,

<sup>5</sup>Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
<sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,

Look how it begins, <sup>5</sup> 'So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him.'

There is no question of self-aggrandisement here. Jesus is God, but at his incarnation he took our human nature in all but sin,

'emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
<sup>8</sup> he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.'

He was sent by God to fulfil the role appointed for him, born in a stable, living from hand to mouth as an itinerant preacher, associating not with nobles but with outcasts and sinners, he lived life at the sharp end. That was God's plan for him and after the three years ministry he had to walk the road to Calvary. This Jesus explains for himself in the gospel reading we have just looked at.

Jesus is seen as a king and priest; here the writer of Hebrews uses words from the psalms firstly psalm 2.

These are quoted in Acts 13,

'And we bring you the good news that what God promised to our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising Jesus; as also it is written in the second psalm,

"You are my Son;  
today I have begotten you."

Jesus has been raised from the dead and the words of the psalms are used here as prophetic of Jesus as Messiah and son of God.

In our reading from Hebrews these are followed by the words from Psalm 110.

The Lord says to my lord,  
'Sit at my right hand  
until I make your enemies your footstool.'

<sup>4</sup>The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."

They are central to the passage which begins and ends with them. I looked them up. Actually this links back to gospel reading with the Messiah, who is ruler, the ruler who will vanquish evil forever.

The psalmist sings of Davidic kingship and the true king being God's servant. The Lord says to my lord,

'Sit at my right hand  
until I make your enemies your footstool.'

Psalm 110 begins,

Apparently the name Melchizedek means 'king of righteousness' and he was appointed by God. The high priests were descendants of Aaron. But Melchizedek far precedes Aaron by six generations. The point is that Jesus' priesthood is nothing to do with that of the Temple. Temple sacrifice and priesthood is superseded by Jesus 'our great high priest.' Jesus is the temple now. He is the presence of God within it.

<sup>7</sup> 'In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.'

Once again, as with our gospel reading, we are taken straight back to Gethsemane and the 'agony in the garden.' Jesus cries out to God that 'this cup may pass from me. Yet not my will but yours be done.'

<sup>8</sup>Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered;

How similar is this to what Paul writes in Philippians, he 'became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.'

The 'perfection' mentioned in our reading in verse 9 means perfect fulfilling of God's will and purpose for him throughout his ministry and death at Calvary. He is indeed, as it says in Hebrews 4.14.

<sup>14</sup> 'a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. <sup>15</sup>For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.'

On this Passion Sunday we turn towards the cross. Next week we will hear the complete passion reading and will begin Holy Week. We thank God that Jesus, human and divine suffered and died in love to win salvation and eternal life for us. We look towards the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday and we thank God for the gift of his Holy Spirit to sustain us in times of trouble and who rejoices with us in times of Joy. We thank God that he has never left us but that Jesus Christ dwells within us all. It is up to us to live lives as Jesus would have us do.

*Lord of infinity stooping so tenderly, lifts our humanity to the heights of his throne.* Graham Kendrick

