

St James' Church, Weybridge

Good Friday 2023

First Reading Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12

The Messiah will come, but his fate will not be like that of kings but, rather, of the suffering of the humanity he joins; his final vindication is in the people drawn to God by his life and death.

Second Reading Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9

We can take courage from the promises of our great high priest because he has lived our experience and knows our humanity from within.

Gospel John 18:1 – 19:42

Jesus, the personification of truth and love while being fully human, submits to the greatest test and shows us the depth of God's love for all humanity in his sacrifice.

HOMILY *"When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit."* (John 19:30)

Good Friday – today we witness the culmination of our Lord's ministry, with the trial of Jesus at Pilate's judgement seat and a cacophony of voices shrieking and screaming "*Crucify him*" and the mockery of "*Hail, King of the Jews.*" Then we move to the Place of the Skull, Golgotha and humanity at its worst. Then, when all seems lost, we are faced with our Lord's last words from the cross, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,*" "*I am thirsty*" and "*It is finished.*"

Our heightened senses warn us, this is not a nice or good day and it is difficult to know how to make sense of today, the day when *the sky turned black and Jesus has the devil on his back* (to paraphrase Sydney Carter and his hymn, *I danced in the morning*). Our senses pick up high treason, deception, darkness, fear, death. It is quite horrific as we imagine the body of our Lord, weeping, anguished. Images of life and death are everywhere, blood and water just two signs of life; which is so very precious – a gift!

In this scene life is tested to the max, with Jesus giving up his own life in the form of a sacrifice, as is written in the Old Testament book of the Law, Leviticus, '*It is blood that makes atonement by reason of life*' (Lev. 17:11) and life is bestowed by the water of regeneration, (Titus 3:5). In death we find life. But how can this be as we face such a terrible sight. The pierced, wounded, weeping body of our Lord Jesus Christ, hanging, agonised. Yet we are bold enough to sing, '*We believe it was for us, he hung and suffered there.*' Indeed, we do. We believe that it is through the shedding of his innocent blood that we are washed free from all that holds us back, our sin, which is the only barrier between us and God. But as we recall this horror, so we may ask why? Why indeed is my Saviour dying for me? Why the cross? During Lent we have reflected upon *The Things He Carried*, a moving text by Archbishop Stephen Cottrell. We have thought about the spiritual, emotional and physical toll of the cross, and our own weight too.

The four Gospels help us to make sense of Jesus' death, as they give different perspectives; eye witnesses both people of faith and those with none. Today we hear

John's theological account with Jesus giving up his Spirit with the words, "It is finished" – perhaps better translated as 'accomplished'. The life mission of the Incarnation is complete and now Jesus dies, just like every other human who has and who will ever walk this earth. The Lord of life and love renders up his Spirit as we all will, one day. He offers his body, his blood for us. Today, we stand at the foot of the cross with Mary and John, the Centurion and others, and look back over the life of Christ and recall the legacy of our salvation lived out in teaching, healing, loving service and forgiveness. In so doing, our senses come alive with the reality of who he is, this God made man who has changed everything and loved us more than we ever thought possible. And still does!

This wonderful Jesus who now seems powerless, submitting to the worst kind of humiliation, is the same man who healed so many by spoken words of hope or mere touch, who brought sight to the blind and hope to the lost. This same man now hanging on the wood of a tree, who spoke life-changing words to a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well and fed 5 thousand people with a few fish and barley loaves.

This same dying Saviour, who forgives from the cross, just as he released the woman caught in adultery from her death sentence and just the evening before his trial, taught his closest friends, his disciples to love one another as he had loved them. The carpenter's son, now incapacitated by stinging nails, still speaks of love when everything else seems lost, as he offers his Mother Mary to John and John to Mary.

This is the same Jesus who once wept at his friend Lazarus' death, before he went on to raise him to life. Now that same Lord Jesus opens his arms wide in embrace for all people, for all time and dies our death, takes away our sins and redeems us by his selfless outpouring of love, just as the water and blood gush from his side. His teaching ministry, his healing ministry, his feeding ministry, his servant ministry is now complete, finished. Our Salvation is accomplished and only death itself stands in the way. So indeed, the sky turns black, and the devil is about to be defeated. Perhaps like me, your senses are overwhelmed by the sheer horror of this scene. Perhaps you too wish to recoil from this day, but friends Good Friday is essential to our faith and our own commitment to be Christ-like.

Today we realize a startling truth: that to follow Jesus means to follow him into Love and that means following him into death too, in order that we may know the life that he, and only he can give – eternal life, heaven, unity with God who loved us first and always does. Therefore, to follow Christ means a call to personal sacrifice. It is not an easy path to tread, an easy life. It is not a walk in the park. If we are not literally persecuted for loving God and others above all other goals, then we certainly die to selfish gain. For the Word was made flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth, and calls us to live out that same grace and truth in all that we are about. It is not a call to mere survival but to the fullness of life; this is not about wealth, status, possessions or anything worldly, after all Our Lord on the cross is stripped bare of any personal gain when he dies. We know we can't take those things with us into eternity. No, this has everything to do with unconditional love.

The death of Jesus is a tragedy, yes, but it is the consequence of him fulfilling the mission God had for him, a call to be among us and unite us to God's love, forever.

He lived and loved fully, and in so doing, he died loving, forgiving and reconciling but this time, not just a few people or a crowd but the whole human race for all time.

Now, when the time comes for each one of us to give up our spirit, we know that we can do so in the real hope of salvation, that Jesus has gone ahead of us to make a way for life eternal. And until that day, when we are called to heaven, we have work to be about as his people, his disciples today, his Church here in Weybridge: loving, forgiving and reconciling all people, our senses alive to his call to service and our hearts full of joy at the hope of the new life on offer. Amen.

Fr Damian Miles, April 2023.