

Sermon for Sunday 17 March 2024 – The Fifth Sunday of Lent

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Jeremiah 31.31-34; Psalm 51.1-13; Hebrews 5.5-10; John 12.20-33

May all I say and think, be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Today is Passion Sunday, the fifth Sunday of Lent, the start of Passiontide. We all know what events the word passion relates to in these our Christian circumstances. But if you're anything like me, and perhaps not bothered to find out why we use that word, with its unfortunate and irrelevant modern day image of exceptional desire of some other sort, I turn to a theological dictionary to get at the true meaning, the original meaning of passion. It comes from the Latin 'passio', or the Greek 'pathema', which means suffering or endurance, and is primarily used in the dictionary for the endurance by a submissive person of inflictions imposed upon him. Well, that makes it all very obvious, doesn't it?

Our readings, and I should be referring to each of them, focus on the events of the next two weeks. But in doing so, emphasise what is to me the central message of Christ's teaching. Now is the judgement of this world. Now the ruler of this world will be driven out. Satan, metaphorical or real, whichever you prefer, is that ruler. Selfishness is his weapon.

I will return to that thought in a moment, but let me first focus directly on our gospel reading. It is apposite that some Greeks are trying to have an audience with Jesus in today's reading; they go first to Philip. Not surprisingly, he has a Greek name. Philip goes to Andrew and he to Jesus. The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified, for the true nature of Jesus to be revealed. We aren't told precisely whether the Greeks get their meeting, but Jesus's reply suggests they do, because he outlines to them a principle of his teaching that is foreign to the Greeks' own ideas of eternal truth.

The Greeks could happily recognise that dying for the sake of others was a noble and dignified thing to do. Dying, that is, to defend a way of life in this world. Dying for justice and earthly freedom. Jesus tells them, and us, that he is dying for love of us, each and every one of us. He is dying to save us all from any notion of pride in what has been achieved by our country, or our family, or ourselves. He puts it, you'll recall, very bluntly; those that love their life will lose it and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus presses home this point time after time, sometimes with uncomfortable examples about hatings one's family. What he means, of course, is that we must see our earthly lives for what they are - selfish. That to me is the work of Satan; or if you prefer, the serpent in the garden of evil, or original sin, or Cain and Abel, or Jacob, brackets Israel and Esau, the wrong way that humankind developed. Jesus is, without any thought of avoidance and quite deliberately, going to his own death.

He knows that he will prove by his resurrection, that death, which is the inevitable conclusion of these sinful lives of ours, can be beaten if only we listen to his plea for, and follow his example of, selflessness. So our reading then turns to Jesus, speaking of his death. Father, says Jesus, glorify your name, your perfection, your righteousness. As the glory, the righteousness, of the Easter tragedy unfurls, let us remind ourselves of the nature of our Saviour and of his central message.

His disciples want to proclaim him their promised Messiah, after Peter's recognition of him as just such; that they would relate to the Old Testament high priest Melchizedek. Messiah, God's anointed, he most certainly is, but not the conquering David they expected. From Isaiah chapter 42: 'Here is my servant, who I uphold, my chosen, in whom my servant delights. I have put my spirit upon him. He will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street. A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench. He will faithfully bring forth justice'. So no noisy rallying calls for the crowds, but a gentleness for the faith that has been bruised, and tenderness for the little flicker of faith that must be nurtured to burn bright and strong.

And we turn to our Old Testament reading from Jeremiah. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people, says the Lord. And today thunder hails the voice of God. And Jesus says, this voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Let Isaiah emphasise that last point, for as he tells us, the servant of the Lord is indeed commissioned to bring Jacob back to him. But that is, it is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel. I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

So how may I summarise the two distinct parts of Bible reading today? I won't. I'll let Jesus do it. Here he is speaking to his disciples in Mark chapter ten: 'You know that among the Gentiles, those whom they recognise as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But is it not so among you? Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant. And whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the son of man, man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life to ransom for many. Amen.