

10am Eucharist for Passion Sunday : 21st March, 2021

Readings

Jeremiah 31. 31 34

³¹ The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband,^[a] says the LORD. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: 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. ³⁴ No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Psalm 51. 1- 13

¹ Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy

blot out my transgressions.
² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.
³ For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
⁴ Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.
⁵ Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.
⁶ You desire truth in the inward being;^[a]
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
⁹ Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.
¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right^[b] spirit within me.
¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing^[c] spirit.
¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.

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Hebrews 5. 5- 10

⁵ So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him,

“You are my Son,
today I have begotten you”;

⁶ as he says also in another place,

“You are a priest forever,
according to the order of Melchizedek.”

⁷ In the days of his flesh, Jesus^[a] 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. ⁸ Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; ⁹ and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, ¹⁰ having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

John 12. 20- 33

²⁰ Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see

Jesus.” ²² Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³ Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ 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. ²⁵ Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour. ²⁷ “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” ²⁹ The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” ³⁰ Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹ Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people^[a] to myself.” ³³ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

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Sermon

Today we enter that final part of Lent known as Passiontide. The mood becomes more sombre, and the theme of the Gospel narrative darkens, as we prepare to enter Jerusalem with Jesus once more on Palm Sunday, for that last tumultuous week of His earthly life, culminating at Golgotha. In the reading from St. John today, Jesus too is preparing for this last visit to the holy city. At the wedding feast in Cana, Jesus told Mary ' My time hasn't yet come'. Elsewhere, John tells us, the authorities in the temple had tried to arrest Jesus, but they did not lay a hand upon Him, because His time hadn't yet come.

Now, Jesus realises His time has come: ' The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified', He says. Jesus' desire is always for God to be glorified: ' Father, glorify Your Name', He prays, and the voice from heaven replies ' I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.' This will be a strange glory, though, not glory as the world recognises it, not pomp and fame and earthly power. And it will be costly, very costly, to Jesus. Today, we see Jesus in His humanity, quailing in the face of what will happen to him. We are reminded, as Tom Wright puts it, that Jesus was the Word become flesh, weak flesh, human flesh, flesh that shrank from suffering as we all might. John does not show us Jesus in turmoil at Gethsemane, wrestling with the final outworking of His calling, as do the other Gospel writers, but we do see it here, our Lord struggling His way through it. ' Now My heart is troubled, and what shall I say? Father, save Me from this hour? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour.'

Jesus was probably about 33 years old. No-one wants their life to end at 33, to be separated from the love of family and friends, but Jesus knew it was the only way to deal with sin, to defeat the devil, to reunite God and humanity. ' Now is the time for judgment on this world; now

the prince of this world will be driven out' , Jesus says. The cross seemed like weakness and defeat. It seemed like the end, but it was actually the beginning of God's new kingdom, the kingdom of light beginning to reclaim the darkness. Christians are called into God's service, to continue the work of Christ, spreading His kingdom into the world, His light into that darkness, not by using the world's standards of power, strength, violence, but through kindness, servanthood, the strength of love. And there is still a lot of darkness in our world.

Sarah Everard was also 33 years old, with so much ahead of her, when she was torn from the love of family and friends, and cruelly murdered. Mothering Sunday will have been just the first of many difficult dates and anniversaries for Sarah's family, and we can but pray that the God Who loves them, the God Who in Christ longs to take all His children under His wing like a mother hen, will grant them the strength and protection they need. This shocking incident must challenge us all to consider the nature of the society we have produced, when the world's standards of power and violence can so manifest themselves. When a man can use his strength, his God-given strength, in such a hideously perverted way, and when so many women can feel anxious and afraid, then the church, as heralds of the kingdom of light must be involved in the subsequent discussions. Hopefully, we can push the darkness back, at least partially, by modelling in the church how women and men may exist in peace and equality.

It is absolutely right that the church should get involved in all areas of injustice, but it is also a temptation. The temptation in opposing injustice is that we come to regard ourselves as the just, and we start thinking that it was only the sins of the unjust, the evil, the murderers, the Hitlers and Stalins, and Pol Pots of this world, that took Jesus to the cross. Jesus took a wider, and rather more unsettling view of sin. Before considering the sins of others, He invites us to examine those planks of wood in our own eyes. If we dare to do so, we discover that the

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frontier between God's kingdom and the kingdom of this world, the war between darkness and light, is right in the middle of our own hearts. We discover that those planks of wood in our eyes also played their part in forming two other planks into the shape of a cross, and nailing our Lord to it.

Are we the just? Jesus died at 33. According to a 2019 World Health Organisation report, average life expectancy in a number of wealthy western nations is 83 or even higher. In Lesotho it is 50. The difference in various other health indicators, including infant mortality rates is equally stark. Much of this is a simple matter of wealth and resource, of the quality of healthcare, even the availability of fresh water and toilet facilities. Now western nations do give aid, and individuals do give to charity, but our lifestyles also benefit from cheap goods and produce, which are the result of low wages and unfair trade policies. Do we want life expectancy and living conditions in Lesotho to improve? Hopefully you all answered yes.

Now do we still want that if it means giving more to charity, or paying higher taxes, or accepting a minor reduction in our living standards? How many people dieing at 50 or younger do we think is an acceptable price to pay for a reliable source of cheap shoes or jeans or t-shirts, or whatever it is? Do we think about it at all? Answering these questions honestly will at least prevent us coming to the foot of the cross on Good Friday feeling that we are the just....

“ Sir, we would like to see Jesus.” This request, made to Philip by a group of Greeks, is further evidence to Jesus that His time is approaching. It has always been God's plan that the new covenant referred to in today's reading from Jeremiah will start with the Jewish people, but then spread out to all the nations of the earth. Now, in these Greeks, the nations of the earth are starting to seek Jesus out, wishing to see Him. ‘ The hour has come’ says Jesus, ‘ for the Son of Man to be glorified.’

Lent is about drawing closer to Jesus, about learning to see Him better. As we get nearer to Holy Week and Good Friday, we see anew the extent and the cost of His servanthood, His sacrificial love. Our Servant King is indeed the grain of wheat Who falls to the earth and dies.

But the crop He produces is nothing less than the salvation of all creation. And as the master, so shall the servant be. ‘ The person who loves their life will lose it, but the person who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life’, says Jesus. Of course, Jesus is not saying we should literally hate our life – it is God's gift to us, after all, but He is saying that we should offer it back to God, by serving Him and our fellow human beings: by effectively dying to ourselves, we shall glorify God and bring His light and life to others, thereby finding ourselves on the path to eternal life, and producing many seeds on the way.

Conversely, someone who loves their life and seeks to preserve it, by amassing wealth, fame, security, but who is not rich towards God and others, remains a single seed, selfish and inward-looking. Ultimately such a person's life withers and dies, and they never discover the fullness of life, the fruitfulness, that only comes by living for God and others. Such a person can never truly see Jesus, because they never truly follow Him. ‘ Whoever serves Me must follow Me’, says Jesus, and where I am, My servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who follows Me’.

Would we like to see Jesus? Then we must follow Him, and let Him lead us where He will. ‘ Where I am, My servant also will be’. Where is Jesus? From the evidence of the Gospel, a good starting place would be to look among the poor, the oppressed, the marginalised and the unloved.

Throughout history, the church has been at its most powerful in proclaiming the Gospel when it has also been championing the rights of the poor and those pushed to the margins of society. It is also on those occasions that the church is most likely to face opposition or worse. This

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is a spiritual battle, and the forces of darkness do not take kindly to our continuing the work of Christ. To give just one example, the church in a number of central American countries is trying to help poor communities find work, in order to keep people out of the clutches of the drug gangs and cartels. It is also providing rehab. for drug addicts, and this threatens the power of the cartels. A number of pastors have been murdered. This really is the front line between those two kingdoms. Where is Christ calling us to follow Him? Perhaps it won't be anything as dramatic as that, but if we are truly following Him, there should be a cost of some sort involved.

This Passiontide, this Holy Week, may our Lord's agonies and His death draw us to the foot of His cross in humble gratitude once more, and may they call us to truly follow Him in costly service to the kingdom of light.

Amen.

Post- Communion Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
you have taught us
that what we do for the least of our brothers and sisters
we do also for you:
give us the will to be the servant of others
as you were the servant of all,
and gave up your life and died for us,
but are alive and reign, now and for ever.

Opening Hymn

There is a Redeemer
Jesus, God's own Son;
Precious Lamb of God
Messiah, Holy One.

*Thank You, O my Father
For giving us Your Son,
And leaving us Your Spirit
'Til the work on earth is done*

When I stand in glory
I will see His face,
There I'll serve my king forever
In that holy place.

Gradual Hymn

May the grace of Christ our Saviour
And the Father's boundless love,
With the Holy Spirit's favour,
Rest upon us from above.
Thus may we abide in union
With each other and the Lord,
And possess, in sweet communion,
Joys which earth cannot afford.

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To the God whose wisdom made us, To the Son who
set us free;
To the sanctifying Spirit, Glory endless glory be.

Offertory Hymn

It is a thing most wonderful,
almost too wonderful to be,
that God's own Son should come from heav'n,
and die to save a child like me.

And yet I know that it is true:
He chose a poor and humble lot,
and wept and toiled and mourned and died
for love of those who loved Him not.

But even could I see Him die,
I could but see a little part
of that great love which, like a fire,
is always burning in His heart.

It is most wonderful to know
His love for me so free and sure;
but 'tis more wonderful to see
my love for Him so faint and poor.

And yet I want to love Thee, Lord;
O light the flame within my heart,
and I will love Thee more and more,
until I see Thee as Thou art.

Final Hymn

O Jesus, I have promised
To serve thee to the end;
Be thou forever near me,
My Master and my friend;
I shall not fear the battle
If thou art by my side,
Nor wander from the pathway
If thou wilt be my guide.

O Jesus, thou hast promised
To all who follow thee
That where thou art in glory
There shall thy servant be.
And, Jesus, I have promised
To serve thee to the end;
O give me grace to follow,
My Master and my friend.