

**Lent 4, 10<sup>th</sup> March 2024**

**Exodus 6:2-13 and Romans 5: 1-11**

**Mother Emma**

*Peradventure for a good man, some would even dare to die, but God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*

Reading this phrase in our reading from Romans as I was preparing my sermon reminded me of a Youth Club I ran in Hampstead as a curate, where we once held an evening session on Christ's self-sacrifice for us. We used a number of well-known film clips to stimulate discussion, and started with one from the film "The Bodyguard" with Whitney Houston and Kevin Costner. Whitney Houston is a spoilt singer, who is encouraged to employ a bodyguard to protect her from a mysterious stalker who is leaving her death threats. Costner plays the taciturn professional bodyguard, who struggles not to fall for her charms. In an early scene, over dinner, she asks him coyly, "Would you really die for me?", to which the dour reply is, "It's the job". I asked the teenagers if they would consider taking on a job in which they might be required to give their lives for someone else, even someone they didn't specially like, and one girl declared: "No, I would only die for someone I really, really loved, because if you did the job for money, you might be killed and then not get the money anyway." It was a perceptive response, and one which was music to the ears of the leaders trying to introduce the theme of Christ dying on the Cross out of love for the human race.

Few of us would give our lives, except to protect those we love.

Today, as we give thanks for our mothers and all who have cared for us throughout our lives, we are perhaps conscious of those who would actually consider dying to protect us. In our passage, Paul suggests that one might die for a righteous man; what is unique and awe-inspiring is the knowledge that Christ offered himself in self-sacrifice for people who had abused, betrayed, tortured, and abandoned him, saying, "*Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.*"

Sacrifice or self-sacrifice today are not particularly fashionable concepts, at least in our Western societies. As the story of Jesus and the example he set us on the Cross become less and less part of the essential fabric and narrative of our nation; as people no longer seek passionately to emulate Christ and his teaching, assuming they are at all aware of them, our society, it seems to me, becomes more and more self-orientated, no longer a place where we put the needs of others before our own, but where many put their own needs ahead of everything else.

As we watch those in positions of authority across the world seek to maintain those positions by trampling upon the lives and hopes of others (as, of course, King Herod did when threatened by the birth of Christ), we see the very opposite of self-sacrifice.

We who carry the flame for Christian teaching, morals, ethics and behaviour, are challenged to speak of sacrifice or suffering in this world, for the sake of others made in the image of God. Our passage begins, *“Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”* We who gather, Sunday by Sunday, to worship God and to hear his word, *we* are the bearers of his truth, which calls us to follow Christ’s example of self-giving. We are those whose faith lies deep within us, and who, through this faith, have peace with God – a peace which passeth all understanding, and which can sustain us through suffering, anguish and anxiety, even in the face of the increasingly worrying aspects of the world today.

Paul encourages the Romans that through our faith in God, we have received his grace and love, and that this enables us to rejoice in the hope God gives us. Paul does not suggest that there will be no hard times – his own life, full of beatings and imprisonments, trials and eventually martyrdom stands witness to this – but that God gives to each one who believes in his name, the gifts of peace, hope and love to sustain us. He goes so far as to say:

*We glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulations worketh patience, and patience experience; and experience, hope: and hope maketh not ashamed, because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given to us.*

Even in our own times of suffering and pain, we can experience the love of God, which underlines his promises of hope and glory to come. It can feel hard to live out a Christian life in modern, secular society.

Our society is wary of those who seem to be over-enthusiastic about their faith, and we don’t want to overdo it, yet we are forgetting Christ’s act of self-giving, if we feel unable to share with others the joys of our faith; the comfort and peace we find in God, or the delight we experience in shared worship or in individual prayer.

We are fortunate that, in this time and this place, it is unlikely that we will experience, as Paul did, physical abuse, imprisonment or death for expressing our Christian hope. Across the world, we are aware of our Christian brothers and sisters for whom this may be still a terrifying daily threat. Perhaps in our relatively safe context, where at most, people will look askance or sneer, we owe it to our brothers and sisters at risk to speak out, as Paul did, and to seek to draw others into the joy, peace and hope which we experience in our love for God, and supremely in his love for us.

Christ made the ultimate sacrifice and revealed God’s abundant love for us. As we remember that he did this, *“while we were yet sinners”*, with all our weaknesses and imperfections, and even our selfishness and hostility, and that he continues to pour out his grace and peace upon us; let us share this message with others, that they too may be drawn into the *“hope of the glory of God.”* **Amen**