

“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

After five weeks of Lent, we have arrived at that period known to the church as Passiontide, a time which draws us inexorably towards the events of Good Friday and of Easter. Today we cover the principal crosses and decorations in purple cloth – a vivid reminder of the solemnity of the two weeks ahead, as we are encouraged to turn our thoughts and our prayers towards the Cross. Next Sunday, as we remember Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, at the start of the week in which he was to die, we shall hear our first reading of the story of the Passion, from Jesus’ arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, to his death on the Cross.

The full reading or singing of the Passion story, together with the arias or reflections on the theology of what we are hearing, can traditionally last for hours, and Christians over the centuries have come together during Holy Week to hear this story read, chanted or sung, not once, but twice, as well as seeing it revealed through the actions of the liturgies of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday. In this way, we live with Jesus through the pain of betrayal and abandonment, the shock, the grief, and then the first glimmers of hope and joy before the full glory of Easter Day.

We shall be offering each of these liturgies at St Mary Abbots again this year, perhaps slightly simplified to allow for the limitations of Covid rules, but embodying the essential emotions and practices of each stage of the journey. If you have never walked this journey of the Cross, it is immensely powerful, and experiencing the many and mixed emotions of Holy Week can make Easter Day the overwhelmingly wonderful and joyful experience which it is at its best. We hope you will share it with us.

But our Gospel reading today serves as a kind of preparation or “trailer” for all these events.

My husband and I often wonder about the modern fashion for summarising documentaries or reality television shows at the start: “Today such and such will happen. So and so will do this, while somebody else experiences that.” At first glance, at least, today’s reading from John seems to have been chosen for the same reason – to alert us to everything which is to come, in a shortened and punchy form.

As we know, the Gospel of John is very different from the other three, so-called Synoptic Gospels. It is generally believed that John wrote later than the other Evangelists, drawing on the material they had collated, and adding in further eyewitness reports to which he himself had access. He also incorporated his own theological insights, written from the standpoint of a Christian community, for whom Christ’s death was still a living memory, but who had also witnessed the extraordinary growth and strength of the early believers in his Resurrection.

We see elements of all the familiar stories of Jesus’ life throughout John’s Gospel, but generally they are not explicitly narrated but implicitly or symbolically represented in

images or conversations. The whole Gospel leads us from its opening chapters towards the Passion.

At the very beginning of John's narrative, Jesus abruptly rebukes his mother, who has asked him to help out a wedding host who is fast running out of wine, "My hour has not yet come." He does, of course, help by turned the washing water into additional wine, but we have already been alerted that Jesus believes he has come primarily for one particular moment or act. So, when we hear his declaration today, "The hour has come", we are immediately caught up in the tense knowledge that we have reached the final denouement.

Just before today's Gospel began, Jesus entered Jerusalem, to be greeted by enthusiastic crowds waving palm branches, and hailing him as the "King of Israel". Symbolically, he finds a donkey and sits upon it, to remind the crowds of the Old Testament prophecy which speaks of a King coming on a donkey, but also to portray his own humility, as he arrives not in triumph on a great war-horse, but on the back of a beast of burden.

As he speaks to the crowds, and to his disciples, Jesus seems to have an experience which echoes the story we know well of his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. He admits that his soul is troubled at the prospect of what lies ahead of him, and seems to wonder briefly whether he should ask God to spare him this suffering, but immediately answers himself, "It is for this reason I have come to this hour."

His Incarnation, his ministry and teaching, everything we know about his life, have led to this moment, the giving of himself upon the Cross to reveal God's glory and love.

And as we look ahead to Good Friday, Jesus tells us, "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

We have moved at breakneck speed, through the events of Holy Week – triumphal entry, Gethsemane, self-sacrifice - as we may experience them next week.

But the key may lie in the mysterious story of the Greeks who tell the apostle Philip, "Sir, we want to see Jesus."

We are not told why they want to see Jesus – whether just to clap eyes on a celebrity; to have a chance to debate with him, to ask him questions; to seek healing or simply to stand in the presence of one rumoured to have some direct connection with God himself.

To be honest, it isn't clear whether the Greeks who wish to see Jesus ever get to see him, but the news that they are here seeking him leads Jesus to declare that his moment has come, that he must face the Cross, and experience the Resurrection in order to draw people like these to himself.

If we come here during Holy Week, allowing ourselves to share in the suffering, the self-giving, the glory and the joy of Christ's own story, we too may be able to fulfil our own hope: "Sir, we want to see Jesus."