

## St Mary Abbots, Eucharist

Passion Sunday

Isaiah 43:16-21. Philippians 3:4b-14, John 12:1-8

Father Christopher

So, we are here again, as we come to mark Jesus's final days of earthly life; to take ourselves through the grief and many other emotions which are evoked as we seek to enter into Jesus's suffering, and which we must do before we can enter into the joy of the resurrection. As Christians we can have a tendency, in our eagerness to share our faith, to dwell on the joy that our faith brings. That is not a bad thing, but on its own it risks being cheap.

This week there were two things which reminded me of the great strength that our faith has in what it has to say about suffering, and indeed Passion in the way it is meant today means 'suffering'. Today is therefore 'Suffering Sunday', as we begin to dwell on Christ's agony and death.

The first of these two things was our school Passion Play. We are rather more used to nativity plays, as we coo and ah over the sight of so many children dressed as sheep and angels. We did have a donkey in our Passion Play, but we were also very profoundly shown the suffering which is at the heart of Christianity, as we watched our children together depositing one of their number in a tomb. And then the whole school departed in silence.

This was poignant in the same way as the marking of children, and even babies, is with the sign of the cross at the start of Lent, on Ash Wednesday, as we say 'Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.' And it was striking how the children of our school seemed to connect with this meditation on the suffering and death of Christ, even if the following afternoon they were all saying Happy Easter! to me at the school gate as they departed for their holidays. And the second instant was at the funeral of a woman whose mother's funeral I had taken just a few months before.

In the eulogies and the address all spoke of how this beautiful and good woman had lived out her faith in all she did. Her sons spoke of what her faith had meant to them; the priest spoke of how she had celebrated Communion by her bedside on the three days before she died; how she had smiled a greeting to those who came to be with her on her deathbed; and how she had mouthed to her family when no longer able to speak 'I am so blessed.'

Our faith is at its strongest and most real when it looks such suffering in the face and is confident that we believe in something that is bigger than death. It is this strength in the face of suffering and death, and even *in* suffering and death, that I think the church nationally rather failed to show to the nation during the Covid crisis, though heaven knows many individual churches and people did so and continue to do so. But this strength does not come out of no-where: it comes from an identification with the person of Jesus Christ in *His* suffering and death.

We see this devotion to the person of Christ, to His body, in Mary's anointing of His feet with the most expensive oil, and in lavish quantities, in our gospel reading today. There is always a temptation in our day to think about how we are made to feel as a result of our faith; to explain to non-believers how helpful we find prayer, how akin to Mindfulness it is for example, and how good our faith is for our mental health; as well as how good it is for our community.

All of that is true. But actually, our faith has to be based on our devotion to something bigger than ourselves, to *someone* bigger than ourselves. And that person is of course Jesus. There is a great tradition of singing lullabies to Jesus for example: Bach's passions are full of them. And they are not about comforting us, but about devotion to Jesus, for His sake. And as Christians we always have to make sure we have these things the right way round. Adoration of Jesus. Worship of God. This is the centre of our life, and other things flow out of it.

Today's reading reminded me of a pilgrimage the Bishop of Southwark took all his curates on to the Holy Land. In our own churches, and in our own diocese, we might have been very conscious of our own position, and our own neuroses around whether or not we were doing a good job, growing our churches, or whatever, particularly when comparing ourselves with each other.

In the midst of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, surrounded by those from many denominations, other branches of the world church, as processions and rather less ordered groups of individuals whirled around us, we were pilgrims like any other. Our bishop was just one of many bishops. And, after walking the 14 stations of the cross through the streets, we reached a big slab of stone within the Holy Sepulchre called the Stone of Unction, which is supposed to be where Jesus's body was anointed for burial, what Mary is doing in our gospel, though here in advance of His death. And Bishop Christopher poured out a litre of holy oil onto this slab. As it spread its unctuous way over the stone, pilgrims started to wipe pieces of cloth on it, as a relic of this most holy place. Others placed their faces down on it. And we politely touched it and crossed ourselves, not being quite sure how to behave. But in this sign of our closeness to Jesus's death, in this offering in memory of the anointing of Jesus's body, I was conscious of our own insignificance in the light of the magnitude of what we are part of.

We are part of the world-wide church, each of us one of billions of people; this great faith, built over 20 centuries. But most fundamentally, we are part of the Body of Christ. We are incorporated into His Body, and therefore also into His death.

We may shy away from many of the traditional references to death in our faith; though I am often surprised by how readily parents will nod when I describe how in baptism their babies will die to their old selves and be born again. But it is only through being united in the death of Christ – in entering into His suffering on the Cross – that we find our joy in being united with Him in His resurrection. Only through accepting the suffering that comes through being a follower of His, can we hope to find consolation.

That is one of the paradoxes of our faith. We do not valorise suffering – we do not seek it out for its own sake, or glamorise it, though that is a danger to be conscious of. But we know that when we suffer, Christ has been there before us. If we seek to leap straight for Easter joy and glory, we miss out on Calvary. There may be some of you who have not known great trials in your life, though I somehow doubt there are many of you. But as Christians, when one of our brothers or sisters suffer, so do we. In that sense, to be fully human – certainly to be Christian - is to suffer, with others if not for ourselves; to have compassion. And that compassion finds its heart, its well-spring, its grounding, in seeking to share the suffering of Christ with Him. That is what we live out in the sometimes gruelling pattern of services we are beginning this Passion Sunday, and which intensify from next Sunday, Palm Sunday through to Good Friday and Easter.

I pray that we will all seek to follow Christ through this Passiontide, to adore Him, to weep for Him; and to weep with Him at the suffering of so many of His children across His world. And to know that if we will only walk with Him through the valley of the shadow of death, we will discover that it is the way of life. Amen