

“Passion Fruit”, Sunday 29 March 2020

If you phoned up a hundred people at random and asked them the significance of some Christian Festivals I suspect you would get some interesting answers. Many people would correctly describe Christmas as the birth of Jesus and a smaller but still significant number would be able to tell you about the true meaning of Good Friday and Easter. But then what? Maybe Harvest or Mothering Sunday (likely though as Mother's Day) but would they realise that these are Christian Festivals? And then we have ones like today where few would know them outside Christian circles. Today is Passion Sunday. It marks a turning point in Lent. After five weeks or so of inward looking and personal preparation for Holy Week and Easter we concentrate on the “passion” or in more modern language the “suffering” of Jesus. It is really good, I think, that we have a Sunday set aside for this. Really good that we do not go straight from Lent to Palm Sunday where Jesus entered Jerusalem in triumph surrounded by his followers and then through Holy Week to the desolation of Good Friday and the joy of Easter Day. These two weeks are called Passiontide and it starts today.

So, this Passion Sunday let's look a little at the “suffering” of Jesus. One of our Bible readings this morning helps us to do this. The Epistle is Romans 8: 6-11 and the Gospel is John 11: 1-45. Let's look at the Gospel first as it is the one that helps us. When I saw it is chapter 11 of John I remembered that this is the story of Lazarus and Jesus raising him from death. Jesus “suffered” because he loved Lazarus (verse 3) and we see the human side of Jesus as he is really upset when told that Lazarus has died and been placed in a tomb. Barbara and I in our Pilgrimage to the Holy Land in January visited Lazarus' tomb in Bethany together with the impressive Church of Mary, Martha and Lazarus built next to the tomb. This was a highlight of our trip and very moving to now read the story of Lazarus with the image of his tomb in our minds. Mary and Martha were Lazarus' sisters and were also loved by Jesus (verse 5). They had sent word to Jesus that Lazarus was sick (verse 3). By the time Jesus arrived in Bethany Lazarus had been in the tomb “dead” for four days (verse 17). Jesus was met first

by Martha a little way from the tomb (verse 20). Martha then told Mary that Jesus was nearby and “asking for her” (verse 28). Mary and a group of Jews who had come from nearby Jerusalem to comfort the sisters then rushed out to meet him (verses 30-31). When Jesus saw Mary and the Jews weeping over the death of Lazarus he too “was deeply moved in spirit and troubled” (verse 33). He also wept with them (verse 35). He was suffering as a human (he was fully human) even though he knew divinely (he was also fully divine) that Lazarus' “sickness will not end in death” (verse 4). When he arrived at the tomb Jesus was again “deeply moved” (verse 38). He suffered again. He told them to “take away the stone” covering the entrance to the tomb (verse 39) and then said loudly, “Lazarus, come out” (verse 43). Lazarus the “dead” man came out (verse 44) having been raised from the dead by Jesus, the Son of God. This is an amazing and wonderful story highlighting the power of God and Jesus. This power is summarized by Jesus in verses 25 and 26 when Jesus says to Martha “I am the resurrection and the life” and that whoever believes in him will live, even though they die physically and whoever lives and believes in him will never die spiritually. This is the great promise that Jesus gave then to Martha. On Passion Sunday we take this promise on board afresh as Martha did and see the suffering of Jesus first as a human and then divinely as he raises Lazarus from the dead. God subsequently raises Jesus from the dead two weeks later in Jerusalem. In doing this Jesus carried all our human sins and sufferings with him onto the Cross. He was then Resurrected by God his Father and we are all called to repent of our sins and be with him in Heaven for eternity. This suffering of Jesus in the story of Lazarus is important, often being overlooked. It is understandably overshadowed by the tremendous miracle that Jesus performed in raising Lazarus from the dead. But it is why, I think, that this passage of Scripture has been chosen as the Gospel reading for Passion Sunday this year.

Our Epistle this morning is from Romans chapter 8. Verses 10-11 say, “if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive, because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.” This is the apostle Saint Paul looking back post-Resurrection. Our spirit (lower case “s”) is alive because God’s (Holy) Spirit (upper case “S”) is living in us. Our human (mortal) bodies will suffer as Jesus’ human body did but our spirits will live on.

Our Gospel passage is of course pre-Resurrection and the Resurrection itself – the ultimate one-off suffering of Jesus) comes between the two. We need to see the whole picture this Passiontide in order to understand what being a Christian in 2020 is all about. An essential part of the whole Easter story is that it contains Passiontide – the “suffering” of Jesus. This suffering begins with his Temptation by the Devil over 40 days and ends with his physical death on the Cross at Calvary.

We are currently living in times that are unprecedented in most of our lives. Many are very ill, including our own Reverend Graham. Tragically many have died. Jesus this Passion Sunday knows our suffering. He, like us, suffered. Our Gospel passage today and those of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday to come illustrate that vividly. As a Lay Chaplain I am currently unable to visit the sick in Warwick Hospital. Previously when talking with non-believers in their hospital beds a common comment of these patients has been, “I cannot believe in a God who has allowed/caused me to be ill.” This is hard to answer as their minds are closed. Holy Week gives us the answer. Jesus died and rose that we might live. The Bible tells us, “Jesus was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities (sins)and by his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53; 5). God has created a beautiful world for us to live in and gives us the freewill to live as we wish. He gave us the commandments which generations have chosen to largely disregard. But he loves us and wants us to love him. He sent his only Son, Jesus, to set the example for us and to die for us. God then raised Jesus from the dead for us to pay the price for all our sins. To wipe the slate clean. It is not too late. We as Christians must set the example as this prayer tells us,

Where Jesus walks, we will follow.
Where Jesus stops, we will stop.
When Jesus talks, we will listen.
Where Jesus suffers, we will hurt.
When Jesus dies, we will bow our heads in sorrow.
When Jesus rises again in glory, we will share his endless joy.
There is no other way, He is the only way.
Praise be to you Jesus, our King.
Praise be to you Jesus, our King.

Line 3 talks of suffering which we are thinking about today, lines 6 and 7 talk of the post-Resurrection “glory” and “endless joy” and following Jesus as the “only way.” Currently, God’s world is suffering. Times are very difficult. Ultimately there will be glory and endless joy and following Jesus is the only way forward. Praying to God and trusting in Jesus are paramount. Jesus and God brought Lazarus back to life. His sisters and the Jews who came to visit could not do it. They had given up sealed him in the tomb. Passion Sunday is about suffering but it is not the end. No, It is actually the beginning and leads to the “endless joy” on Easter Day – the “Passion Fruit” of my sermon title. Let us not forget this today and in the weeks to come. Amen.

With our love and prayers for you all,
Richard and Barbara.