

Fr James' homily for Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord 2020

First Reading: Isaiah 50:4-7
Second Reading: Philippians 2:6-11
Gospel: Matthew 21:1-11 and the Passion Gospel: 26:14 - 27:66

Today begins Holy Week and the climax and conclusion of the Lenten season. We begin by solemnly recalling - and being part of - Christ's decisive entry into Jerusalem and the centre of our worship is the reading of the Passion Gospel, this year of St Matthew. Often it is said that each of the Gospels is a Passion Narrative with a very long introduction! The whole of the meaning of the Gospel is found in the Passion. Jesus' teaching, His miracles and all His public life are about His Passion. So we set up Holy Week by looking ahead at the whole mystery of Christ's sacrifice.

The great Protestant theologian Karl Barth used to describe the meaning of the Incarnation of Jesus, of God-With-Us, as describing "the way of God into the far country", with a reference to the parable of the prodigal son. The Passion Gospel shows Jesus as the one who journeys into that far country of separation from God. A country far from God's plans and purposes. Jesus is the friend of sinners - *"I have come not for the healthy, but for the sick."* He is to be crucified between two criminals. Jesus goes into the country of sin to bring His divine light there. Going there as the faithfulness of God he soaks up the power of sin. Ask yourself, how do we so often deal with sin? We sin in return. We seek revenge. God, by His love, takes sin away. We only ever do the same to the extent we understand Him.

It is very often said, as we read the Passion Gospel, we see all the forms of human dysfunction on display, and that resonates in our own hearts in different ways. There is first betrayal, the worst of sins in many ways. When we end up betraying others, or ourselves, it hurts us dreadfully, and leaves great wounds. Sometimes it happens because we have been too blinkered to see what's happening, to see the whole picture - how often we end up saying "How stupid could I be".

Then the disciples sleep as Jesus is in His agony in the garden. Laziness, sloth, is so insidious in the ways of the spirit especially. Remember the words of Christ against the "lukewarm" recorded in the Apocalypse.

Then they come with weapons for the Prince of Peace. All the violence and aggression of the world is here, and symbolised in the mindless cutting off of the servant's ear. An irrational act. Violence cuts off communication.

Jesus said to the disciples “Follow me”. Now they all flee. Cowardice of the spirit is so destructive. When I know what I should do but don’t do it. Evil must always be resisted, starting in ourselves. (Hence the importance of an examination of conscience in the coming week.)

Then come the lies and the liars. The false witnesses. Those who will do whatever it takes, or make great compromises to seek their own purposes. Doesn’t that sound familiar?

Then we see Peter and Judas. Peter in his denial exhibits many of the dysfunctions already highlighted. The others single him out, even because of his accent. Ganging up on those who are different, singling out a victim for blame. This happens in all sorts of ways. Judas, it is often said, is no worse than Peter - except that he seeks no forgiveness for his sin, or sees no possibility of forgiveness. That, too, is not as uncommon as you would think - even among the baptised.

And finally Pilate, who uses his authority for his own benefit. The abuse of power and authority reeks such havoc in every walk of life. Professional, family political and of course in the church herself.

All the faces of sin are there on display at the beginning of Holy Week and in this Passion Gospel. Everything that brings about separation and isolation among us. This year that message speaks to us in a new and rather painful way, and each is experiencing isolation in different ways. Those at home, and those under great stress at the front line of the health care system, and then those who are ill. The Good News, which I remind you is the meaning of the word Gospel, is that Good’s love goes into the heart of all this to redeem it and to bring new life and the freedom of God. Let us be with each other this week, in spirit, and let us be with Jesus, so that we can understand He is with us in ways we barely begin to understand.

Fr Tom and I wish you a very blessed Holy Week, and you will all be held in prayer by us. Let us pray for one another.

Amen.