

Good Friday

10th April 2020

'Coronavirus & the Cross'

Is 52–53: *He was pierced through for our faults*

Ps 30: *My life is in Your hands, deliver me from the hands of those who hate me.*

Heb 4; 5: *During His life on earth He offered up prayer and entreaty ...*

Jn 18–19: the Passion according to John.



One of the things I most missed once I left seminary in 1999 was the way we'd celebrate the ceremonies of Holy Week. In seminary, with all the time and talents to hand, we had the opportunity to celebrate these liturgies in ways that were extremely beautiful,

and the thing that I miss perhaps the most is the singing of Passion of St John on Good Friday. It took a lot of rehearsal, for every word of it was sung: a deacon singing the narration; another singing the part of Christ; a third deacon singing the parts of the other characters; and then the *schola*, an ensemble singing in polyphony the 'crowd' parts. It took about 30 mins to sing, and I recall happily

taking part in the *schola* for this, 6 yrs in a row: it was the most moving liturgical telling of the Passion of Our Lord, in some ways the centre-piece of Good Friday, a jewel of sublime beauty at the heart of a day of penance and prayer. It happens that just today I was able to access a recording of it from the seminary from last year — little did they know that, in Rome, along with the rest of us here in England, they'd not be singing it this year at all! For me, within that sung Passion, two things stand out. (i) the first is the crescendo and viciousness with which we were to sing those words of the crowd, pleading with Pilate not to let Jesus off: "Crucify Him! Crucify Him ... Away with Him, crucify Him!" (ii) And the second thing is the sorrowful chant at the end, as the Passion draws to its close, after Jesus has died and is buried: it makes use of a plaintive Jewish lament — it always brought tears to my eyes. Listening to the recording today, it brought tears to my eyes again.

Well, never would I have imagined that one Good Friday I would be missing not only a certain singing of the Passion of John, but that I would be missing a whole

congregation! It's a most bizarre Good Friday, in which not only is it a day of penance — fasting and abstinence, in which we give up a certain amount of food, and refrain from eating any meat — but in which we are also giving up being together (the usual full church, sombre and still, to hear those poignant words of the Passion, to cry out with the crowd, “Crucify Him! Crucify Him,” to creep to kiss the wood of the Cross, to sing those plaintive Passiontide hymns, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross ...” / “My Song is Love Unknown ...”) All this, we are giving up, this year, as a greater penance than ever: giving up our presence at the sacraments, the liturgy, the ceremonies that express the central mysteries of our beloved Lord's saving sacrifice. Perhaps more keenly than ever in these recent weeks, we will be sorely missing these Holy-Week liturgies: Holy Thursday night, today (Good Friday), and Easter, celebrated at the great Vigil Mass, and Easter Sunday morning.

Fr Joshy & I — in our own small way — have just kept the 3 o'clock Passion liturgy here in church, and have enfolded you all in the prayer of this sacred day. The

Church, for this year, has added an 11th petition to the great set of prayers that precede the veneration of the Cross:

(For the afflicted in time of pandemic)

Let us pray also for all those who suffer the consequences of the current pandemic, that God the Father may grant health to the sick, strength to those who care for them, comfort to families and salvation to all the victims who have died ...

Almighty ever-living God, only support of our human weakness, look with compassion upon the sorrowful condition of your children who suffer because of this pandemic; relieve the pain of the sick, give strength to those who care for them, welcome into your peace those who have died and, throughout this time of tribulation, grant that we may all find comfort in your merciful love. Through Christ our Lord. R. Amen.

As we prayed this extra prayer, and as we conducted the whole Passion service in solemn simplicity, we were mindful that our ceremony did still gather together spiritually the people of the whole parish, focussing all our hearts, and our intentions, on the loving Lord Jesus who has suffered human death in the horror of the Cross. It's important that we all offer *this* Good Friday — when we can't come to church — in a special way as a sacrifice of prayer for the health of the world, and to plead with the Son of God, who knew Himself a human death, for those

suffering acutely from the virus; for those suffering bereavement having lost loved ones unexpectedly — and for the many deceased themselves — and for those suffering exhaustion and anxiety as health-service workers, nurses and doctors, in this overwhelming affliction.

Above all despite the whole tragedy of this pandemic, as it grips the world, yet as Christians we also spend Good Friday looking at the Cross with great hope, not only as the place of a horrific death. The loving God can always bring good, and better, things out of event of evil and suffering. The Cross proves this — for the self-offering of Jesus on the Cross was the necessary path to His resurrection and our salvation. So, this Good Friday — and in our ‘long Good Friday’ as we suffer these civic restrictions and our enforced absence from church — may our prayer be for us to learn the lessons that God teaches us from the Cross. Our Lord’s going to Calvary was principally about expressing His love for humanity. Let us, this holy and sunny day, love Him deeply in return, and say ‘yes’ to being agents of Christian love in this world, whatever the cost.