

Good Friday

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Good Friday, 19 April 2019

Reading: Isaiah 52 verse 13 – 53 end

On this Good Friday we hear again the magnificent passage from Isaiah which has come to be known as the Fourth Servant Song. Along with the Passion narratives from the four gospels (we heard the account of the Passion as recorded by St Luke last Sunday morning), there are few other passages in literature which are their equal for solemnity and for horror expressed in measured and exquisite simplicity of language. Today, we stand on holy ground and enter into the wonder and mystery of Good Friday.

Isaiah prepares us for what is to come. For Christians it is very easy, even inevitable, to read the words of the prophet as a foretelling of the story of Jesus' suffering. The evangelists encourage us in this interpretation as they relate again and again that a certain act during the arrest and crucifixion occurred as a fulfillment of 'what is written,' 'that the Scripture might be fulfilled.'

So when we read in the prophecy of Isaiah chapter 53 that

'He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity,
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account',

we can see that what we are reading is a description of the condition of Jesus after the flogging that Pilate ordered, even though he 'found no case against him'; we see again the terrible sight of the thorns piercing his brow; the shame of having temple police and members of the mob strike him on the face. We allow ourselves to feel the terrible pain and the shame that, in the words of the early twentieth century novelist Dorothy L Sayers, 'the man we hanged was God Almighty'. Unless we realise the horror, the weight of such an act, she says, we cannot feel the extent and importance of this drama. By indifference and thoughtlessness, we have made it dull, she complains. 'But this is [what] we profess every time we recite the Creed, the terrifying drama of which God is both victim and hero.'

We must not allow the familiarity of the story to rob it of its horror and of its drama. Even though this is the underlying story in every act of worship, it is on Good Friday that the words and the images are most poignant and most powerful.

This is the day on which God, in the person of Jesus, suffers the worst that human beings suffer. And throughout eternity, this suffering is part of God's nature.

'He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.'

In the person of Christ, this prophecy, these words, become the beating heart of the theology, our understanding of God and his relationship with us, that the Church was to develop. 'By his bruises we are healed.' How is it possible that one man's wounds can heal the rest of us? By the time the letter to the Hebrews was written, the Church had arrived at an understanding which is expressed less poetically than in Isaiah, 'And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus

Christ once for all.' Later in the same chapter, the writer assures us, 'For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified,' and 'where there is forgiveness of [our lawless deeds], there is no longer any offering for sin.' Everything changes on this day.

The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross on a specific day in human history, in a specific place called Golgotha outside Jerusalem, 'the green hill outside the city wall' in the familiar words of the hymn, is of the most profound significance for each one of us. Jesus' offering was made once and for all. Jesus gives this gift to us freely. Not because we deserve it. But because he loves us. He invites us to accept this gift, trust in the deep and profound mystery of those healing wounds, and be thankful.

Nothing can come close to the impact of the words used in the passion story we find in St John's gospel. We read the arguments among the accusers of Jesus, their questions, Jesus' answers, Jesus' silences, the bloodthirstiness of the mob, the fears of Pilate, the fear and, dare we say it without knowing how we might have reacted in their place, the cowardice of Jesus' friends. After the last cry of the chief priests, 'We have no king but the emperor!', John continues in shattering simplicity: 'Then (Pilate) handed him over to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him.'

There they crucified him. There is no need for John to describe the sound of the hammer on the nails as they tear the flesh and ligaments to enter the wood of the cross. But we hear it. There is no need for John to tell us how the body hangs from those torn hands and becomes a sagging mass of bones. But we feel the horror of the sight. John knows the importance of telling us of Jesus' touching care for Mary, his mother, as he entrusts her to his dearest friend. And this human concern is followed by the human cry, as Jesus experiences the terrible dryness in the throat as life ebbs away. 'I am thirsty.' And then, the human blends with the divine in the final cry, 'It is finished.' The drama of the incarnation has drawn to a close. The body he received from a human mother is breathing its last breath. At the same time, the work Jesus came to do is completed. It is accomplished. It is finished. It is the moment of victory, which changes everything.