

Lent 5

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 3 April 2022

Readings: Philippians 3 vv 4b-14 and John 12 vv 1-8

Today, we begin the last fortnight of Lent. Passiontide. The word itself has an ambiguity in English. Passion is usually taken to mean intense and uncontrollable affection and love. The Vicar was surprised when the young couple told him that they had chosen 'There is a green hill' and 'When I survey the wondrous cross' for the marriage service. 'Wonderful hymns,' he said to them, 'but rather unusual wedding hymns.' 'Yes,' said the bride, 'but they were they only ones we knew in the section headed Passion hymns.' It's an easy mistake in a language where words don't always mean what we think they mean. This fortnight is called Passiontide, because of the other meaning of the word: suffering (from the Latin roots of the word).

Reading and listening to stories of how God has worked in the lives of other people always fascinates me. This is one reason, I suppose, why I have a fairly large collection of biographies of Christians.

One of the most profound of all testimonies is the one Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians. This is one of the most intimate and personal of all Paul's letters: he writes with great warmth and affection to the Christians at Philippi. And in the excerpt from the letter we have heard today, we find Paul speaking about what has inspired and driven him, even since he had that dramatic encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus.

Paul reminds the Philippians of his strong credentials as a Jewish traditionalist: 'I have more reason than anyone to be confident' he begins. His upbringing and his knowledge are not bad in themselves. However, when compared with Christ, they are like rubbish, and to be discarded. This is a surprisingly strong word, but Paul clearly means what he says. Jesus Christ is the reality to whom Paul's early upbringing pointed, really without Paul knowing it until confronted dramatically by Jesus. The governing passion in Paul's life (and we can almost feel the passion in this account) is to know Jesus.

For Paul, his Christian faith, 'knowing Christ Jesus my Lord', is not a vague theory, something to satisfy those 'who like that sort of thing'. Rather, it results in a transformed life: 'a righteousness that comes through faith in Christ', quite unlike the vain attempts at striving for 'righteousness' that dominated Paul's life before he knew Jesus as a living Saviour. Knowing Jesus is possible only because of the 'power of his resurrection' – and this has so completely filled and transformed Paul that it provides him with both his motive for living and his effectiveness in his ministry of teaching and service.

Yet this not without cost. Paul has had to identify with the sufferings of Jesus: he has written earlier in this same letter to the Philippians, 'For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain'.

But Paul knows that the prize of living completely in Christ is his. He will know this completeness when his earthly life ends. For now, Paul is content to live a Christ-filled life, so that in his body and in his experiences, in what he is and what he does, he is making his crucified and risen Saviour better known. Everything else is a waste of time.

Turning to today's Gospel reading, we find what appears at first to be a charming domestic scene: Jesus is having dinner with his friends at Bethany. No doubt this is a much-needed break from the demands of the crowds, from the teaching and healing. Jesus' humanity is to the fore. He is essentially passive, enjoying being spoiled by his host, Lazarus, with Martha serving the meal and Mary tenderly anointing Jesus' feet. Mary's gesture is wonderfully extravagant, as (perhaps without fully realising it at this stage) she anticipates Jesus' demonstration of perfect love when he is crucified.

But this delightful scene doesn't last for long. A blast of cold wind comes from the usual suspect. John has left us in no doubt that Judas is not a pleasant character. His chilling presentation of the market economy is both distorted and selfish. Judas reveals his completely inability to understand extravagant love and thus to grasp the heart of the gospel.

Mary has understood Jesus, unlike the indifferent masses who are such a feature of the story of Jesus' crucifixion. So has Paul: that is what has brought him to life and which allows him to write with such compelling passion.

And it is the extravagant love of Jesus that will be in our minds as we begin this last fortnight of Lent, Passiontide. The love that enabled him to endure the pain and agony of crucifixion.