

## Lent 5 (Passion Sunday)

A sermon preached at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, on 18 March 2018

*Readings: Hebrews 5 verses 5-10 and John 12 verses 20-33*

Sorting through some papers during the cold weather of a couple of weeks ago, I found an order of service for a pilgrimage from Guernsey to Coutances in Normandy, to the cathedral which was Guernsey's cathedral until the fifteenth century. To go on pilgrimage is a deeply rooted characteristic of Christian life, going back many centuries. Pilgrimage might have been much more demanding years ago, before the arrival of mass transportation, but amazing numbers of people went on pilgrimage – as Chaucer relates in the *Canterbury Tales* – to holy places. And still people go on pilgrimage today. One of the challenges is to help people who arrive at churches and cathedrals and other holy places as tourists and visitors to experience the spiritual significance of the place they are visiting – to help those who have arrived as tourists to leave as pilgrims.

One of the very first pilgrims was a woman called Egeria. She lived in Spain in the fourth century, where she was an abbess, or at least a nun. Remarkably, considering the difficulties of travel in those days, she travelled throughout modern Turkey, Egypt and Israel. What is important for us is that Egeria kept a very detailed diary of her experiences, particularly of her participation in services in the Christian communities she visited on her travels.

One of the most fascinating parts of this travel diary is her account of the keeping of Holy Week in the church in Jerusalem - as what she describes has formed the basis of how churches today reflect the different moods and experiences of this most holy time of the Christian year, which we begin next week.

Holy Week is a roller-coaster of mood swings. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday, when we remember how Jesus came at last into the city of Jerusalem. The crowds went wild with excitement - they greeted Jesus like a king, waving branches of palm, covering the road with their cloths to make the journey over the rough roads smoother and more comfortable. A fortnight today is Easter Day, when we rejoice that Jesus rose from the dead and that he is alive and with us always.

But so often people move straight from Palm Sunday to Easter Day, without going through the rest of this special, Holy Week. When you are playing *Monopoly*, and you are sent to jail, you go directly to jail: 'Do not pass Go; do not collect £200' say the instructions. We miss even more if we go from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday without going on pilgrimage in the way of the cross, walking with Jesus through the events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. If you like, you can't have an Easter egg unless you have eaten a hot cross bun.

My first experience of keeping Holy Week fully was over thirty years ago when I was able to spend the week with an ecumenical religious community in the beautiful surroundings of an Elizabethan manor house in Suffolk. From Palm Sunday we shared daily worship through the week until we came to the beginning of the solemn three days on Maundy Thursday. After sharing a meal in the great hall, we broke the bread and shared the cup, not perhaps so very differently from that last supper in the upper room. Like the disciples, we then went our separate ways in silence, every now and again returning to pray in the silence of the small chapel. Good Friday was a stark and intensely painful day as we meditated on the psalms and the readings, eating very little

and with the church dominated by the boughs of a tree tied together in the form of a rough cross. The Saturday was empty, as we began to prepare the church for Easter. We were early to bed as we were to rise in the darkness of the very early morning, I think about 4 am, for a vigil of psalms and readings, followed by the kindling of a new fire from which we lit the great Easter candle. We carried this symbol of the light the risen Jesus brings to our hearts and lives into the church just as the grey English dawn broke through the windows. We shared Communion together and, since it was only about 8 am when the service finished, we had a wonderful breakfast together, complete with Easter eggs.

That was one way of making the journey from Palm Sunday through Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Most of us won't have the luxury of being able to do anything like that. But there are many different ways in which each of us can mark this special week. The yearning in our hearts as we approach Holy Week is, I hope, the same as that on the lips of the Greeks in today's gospel: 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.'

It is impossible to know exactly what was in their minds when they made this request of Philip, but the answer they received was perhaps very different to what they expected. In the first letter to the Corinthians, Paul describes the cross as being a demonstration of 'foolishness to the Greeks'; whereas Jesus speaks about his coming suffering and death as how he is glorified – and so as how God's glorious redemption will be revealed. Did those Greeks arrive as visitors but perhaps leave as pilgrims?

For John, the moment when the Greeks come to find Jesus is the sign for Jesus to recognise that his time has come, because Jesus has come into the world for all people – for Greeks (representing all Gentiles) as well as Jews. Jesus' new life is for all people.

It is only by his sacrifice that Jesus will obtain eternal life for all who follow him. And so his death is his moment of glory. His death will be his 'lifting up' – his triumph and his glory.

In the words of Bill Vanstone, a twentieth century theologian:

Therefore he who shows us God  
helpless hangs upon the tree;  
and the nails and crown of thorns  
tell of what God's love must be.

In different ways we will all be walking the way of the cross this coming Holy Week, because it is only through the cross and our awed observation of Jesus' 'lifting up' that we can come to Easter so that we can shout with joy and conviction that Christ is risen!