

Revd Michael Burns
Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon :
March 18, 2018 ~ “Lent 5”

Today, Passion Sunday, is the start of the run up, if I can put it like that, to our Holy Week commemoration and Easter celebrations. So I would encourage you to look at the yellow timetable of all the services planned here at Christ Church and decide what you might plan to attend. Of course I am conscious that it is a working week and it is inevitable that many can only come to Church for the celebrations on Palm Sunday and the celebrations on Easter Day. But of course the consequence of that means that there is perhaps less understanding of the momentous events of the days that fall in between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday. For Holy Week is the one week of the year when we can literally make a pilgrimage for the week in real time, following the same timeline as Jesus would have walked those 100's of years ago.

So I hope that this year many of you will want to follow Jesus on his way to the Cross during Holy Week. After the celebratory mood of the entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday when the Passion from Mark will be read, when the whole story of the week is anticipated, we start three days – Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday – of quieter reflection, remembering the days when Jesus quietly taught the people in the Temple, whilst the authorities were plotting against him. Each evening at 8pm there will be a simple service of prayer, music and meditation led by members of the congregation. Come and join in the stillness, the waiting of those early days of Holy Week. Then the great 3 days – called the Triduum – begins on Maundy Thursday evening at 8pm with our Eucharist followed by a symbolic stripping of the altar – and then a silent watch till 10ish. Good Friday morning sees a Walk of Witness around Raynes Park organised by all the local Christian Churches which we hope you might join in – it'll be ideal for all ages – when the story of Good Friday will be enacted. By the way I've got to recruit a few people with hammers ready to gently nail prayers written on post-it notes onto a cross. Later on, here at Christ Church, we will keep the solemn last hour from 2 till 3, with readings, music and silence. Then there is space for the rest of Friday and Saturday as we remember the broken body of the crucified Jesus lying in the borrowed tomb, awaiting for proper burial early on Sunday morning. But when the women went to prepare the body for burial, they found – nothing – Jesus was no longer there for he had risen – and that is the start of our great Easter celebrations – 6.45am for our sunrise service with the blessing of the fire, the lighting of the Easter candle and the renewal of our baptismal vows and then breakfast – followed by our Easter services at 8am + 10am & 6.30pm. So I do encourage you to come and join together in this journey through Holy Week whenever you can.

But before all that we have today, Passion Sunday – when Jesus was clearly beginning to realise he was nearing the end of his earthly life.

In our Gospel reading today, we are told of some Gentile Greeks who want to seek out Jesus. He had just finished cleansing the temple so that it could be restored as a house of prayer for all people of all nations – and, lo and behold, surprise surprise, here are representatives of those other nations suddenly asking for him. As John records the event, it's as if Jesus suddenly catches sight of the future, with the people of all nations giving God glory and worshipping him. But at the same time he recognises and is acutely aware of the necessary agony he must suffer for it all to happen, and as he is a human being, he understandably shrinks from the dreaded prospect of what is to come. He battles with what all human beings know so well – the powerful human instinct to preserve ourselves and avoid pain and conflict. Just because he knows he is the Son of God doesn't mean he is protected in any special way from wanting to avoid suffering if that is at all possible. But then we read that love does triumph and Jesus surrenders himself into God's hands – what will happen will be done, and willingly done. Powerfully, at the end of our passage, God affirms what he has chosen and everyone in the crowd – Jew and Gentile – hear that Jesus is ready to accept what will happen to him for the good of the whole world.

But it is a very hard choice. Jesus knew that he was alive on this earth in order to save the world, something he was willing to do because he loved people. But he also knew that saving the world was bound to lead him into suffering and danger, more acute pain and agony than any human being should have to face. Not to put too fine a point on it, it would involve taking on himself all the sin and evil of the world, and continuing to love right through it all.

Yes, he had a choice – either to go ahead with saving the world, taking on the suffering as part of it all, or avoiding that suffering by opting out, in which case the world would have no hope of being saved. Everything human in him screamed out against going through the pain of it all; but everything divine in him pleaded for love and selfless giving whatever the cost. We know what Jesus chose. Love won and he chose to go through hell, giving up everything including his life, just so that we could be set free to live. It is said that often through suffering we get a glimpse of glory.

When I was in my first curacy in Shropshire, the Coalport China Factory was still going strong and I always enjoyed visiting to see the amazing process. Artists would apply some very unattractive coloured paints to the china – yellowish-brown, bluish-black, dirty-looking red. The edge of the china was circled with black. Then the china was fired in the oven, and the fire brought about an amazing transformation. The blue and red became bright; the black became gold. It was through the furnace of sorrow and suffering that Christ became transfigured into glory and triumph.

A spiritual writer, F W Roberston, wrote this “Shut out suffering and you see only one side of this strange thing called human life. Brightness and happiness and rest – that is not life. It is only one side of life. Christ saw both sides”.

And so we are given, once again this Holy Week and Easter, the chance to walk with our Lord on his path of suffering. And we do so in order to reach the end so that we can truly celebrate his Easter glory. Do resolve to come and join in this unique pilgrimage through Holy Week so that together we may celebrate that we are truly God's Easter people.