LENT 5 2021

Today is Passion Sunday, the start of the run up to our Holy Week commemoration and Easter celebrations. Today marks a change of gear in the season of Lent, with the cross casting its shadow over the coming fortnight as move to the time when we are invited to seek out Jesus, to follow him on his way to the Cross.

In our Gospel reading, we are told of some Gentile Greeks who also 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 suddenly here are representatives of those other nations asking for him. As John records the event, it's as if Jesus 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 quite 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 whole world.

But it is all a very hard choice. Jesus knew that he was alive on this earth in order to save the world, something he wanted to do because he loved the people. But he

also knew that saving the world was bound to lead him into suffering and danger. 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 there would be no chance of the world being saved. And it was clearly not an easy thing to choose. 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. In our own human lives, we know that it is often through suffering that we glimpse glory.

When I was in my first curacy in a parish near Ironbridge on the River Severn 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 the most 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*".

The writer to the Hebrews proclaims Jesus as high priest. John writes of Jesus being 'lifted up' and gathering all people to himself. All this helps draw us to the cross as the place where love 'so amazing, so divine' is revealed in all its fullness. And so, we are given, once again this Holy Week, the chance to walk with our Lord on his path of suffering in order to reach the end so that we can truly celebrate his Easter glory.