

## Sermon for Passion Sunday 29 March 2020

### Opening Prayer

*Lord of our Passion:*

*As we begin to contemplate your journey to the cross, help us to carry our own burdens, and through being lightened of our own load, discover fresh opportunities to accompany others through their dark days and nights: through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*

What are you most passionate about? For what are you prepared to suffer?

Today is Passion Sunday (patior is Latin for to suffer), and it marks the beginning of Passiontide, the two weeks leading up to Easter. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday and after that follows Holy Week.

Only a few weeks ago, the question “What are you most passionate about?” would have sounded a little rhetorical; answers would have been wide-ranging but also predictable: family, friends, work, hobbies, pets, and so on.

Today, the same question will generate serious answers and perhaps some very precise ones. We might name someone we know in hospital or is very lonely at home; a family we know struggling to entertain children every day; the selfishness of a few in our community and the generosity of very many. In the world of COVID-19 these are the things that we are really passionate about; the practical concerns that stir our emotions and get us worked up. And then there are the larger and unquantifiable passions that we may be starting to have: how is this virus crisis going to play out? What will change permanently as a result? Just how much will our lives, our communities, our churches and even our homes be changed?

Last year when I preached on Passion Sunday, I noted how in this country we tend not to appear very passionate about our faith. The last two weeks have proved to me just how untrue that statement really is. Our passion for our faith and for our church community has emerged in the past fortnight like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis. How ironic that at the very moment we are all confined to our homes and all normal life is suspended, we become aware of just how important our faith is to us!

It is a testing time because as Christians we are called into service. Being denied the opportunity to serve in ways we are accustomed to is hard, very hard. But we must remember that our vocations as Christians remain absolutely intact – the only difference is that we are being challenged to explore our calling and our faith in new ways.

Our Old Testament reading today could hardly be more appropriate. The prophet Ezekiel is led into a valley full of bones; God calls him to prophesy to these bones and restore them to full life. Trusting in God he does as the Lord commands him to, and a vast multitude of people emerge from the valley.

We may feel that our lives are like that valley of dry bones; that everything we found life-giving and enriching has been removed from us. That feels especially raw for those of us who miss the opportunity to share fellowship together in church. We miss one another enormously; we miss our buildings and the peace and reassurance they offer us; we miss one another with all our wonderful idiosyncrasies; we miss the opportunity to care in the ways we were used to.

Yet if we observe carefully, we can see that God is already breathing new life into our church and into our communities. Our care of one another was always good, but now it is heading towards exceptional. We were not very good perhaps at communicating with one another – but that is rapidly improving now. I believe we are already becoming much more intentional, creative and organised in thinking

about how we go about sustaining one another in our faith and in our lives. Not for a moment am I going to let my optimism run away with me, but I do sincerely believe that God can transform the horrors of this time, and if we are open to the Holy Spirit all sorts of marvellous outcomes will begin to emerge.

Our gospel reading today has none of the mysterious beauty of Ezekiel's Valley of the Bones. It finds Jesus in the heart of a family and personal tragedy. The death of his dear friend Lazarus. John's portrayal of this story is complicated by the theology that John has written back into his account of the original event. Setting that aside it is possible to sense the very great pain of Mary and Martha, Lazarus' sisters, and of Jesus himself as he encounters Mary and her grief, which in turn arises in him a mixture of guilt at his failure to be in the right place at the right time, and of course, his own raw grief too.

This story is important because it is an ordinary human story that involved and affected Jesus. It reminds us that Jesus is deeply embedded in ordinary lives, ours included, and suffers when we suffer and cries when we cry. It reminds us that we are not alone in our suffering, and calls us to ensure that Jesus – wherever Jesus is present in the world today – is not alone in His continuing suffering either.

None of us knows how the next few weeks and months pan out. That COVID-19 has risen to become such a critical issue during Lent is not lost on us theologically of course. We are journeying through difficult and dark days of wilderness but the promise of resurrection is not far away either.

I'm going to close by reading to you a poem by RS Thomas: 'The Kingdom'. Here is a poem that helps us journey from the realism of our current experience to the hope of God's dawning world. However new or fumbling or confused our faith might be, may Thy Will be Done.

## The Kingdom

It's a long way off but inside it  
There are quite different things going on:  
Festivals at which the poor man  
Is king and the consumptive is  
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look  
At themselves and love looks at them  
Back; and industry is for mending  
The bent bones and the minds fractured  
By life. It's a long way off, but to get  
There takes no time and admission  
Is free, if you will purge yourself  
Of desire, and present yourself with  
Your need only and the simple offering  
Of your faith, green as a leaf.

We are less than a week to the start of Holy Week. As we prepare for that in anticipation, expectation and perhaps some hesitancy – let us keep our hearts wide open so we do not miss a thing.

Through this Passiontide may all our hearts be opened afresh to the Spirit of Christ within and amongst us, **Amen.**