



Good Friday
10th April 2020

Three Days in Holy Week

In our reflections this morning I thought we might ponder together not just on this day, which we call Good, but also on those that proceed and follow it: Maundy Thursday and Holy Saturday.

Yesterday

After celebrating Passover and speaking of his death in bread and wine Jesus and the disciples move out of the city to the foot of the Mount of Olives to the fragrant, peaceful Garden of Gethsemane.

Sometimes our deepest thinking is done when we break away from routine or busyness.

All our routines have changed. We leave this Lent in different circumstances to which we entered it. Many people have told me that in a strange way they have embraced the time and space that has come our way.

Jesus is at prayer on Maundy Thursday evening.

Although the gospels are written in Greek some writers have Jesus addressing God in Aramaic, as Abba – an unusual, but not totally uncommon, name meaning Father or Papa. A respectful yet deeply intimate term.

Paul Gerhardt, in his hymn, O Sacred head, reflects this sense

of intimacy with God in the verse that ends:
O make me thine for ever,
and, should I fainting be,
Lord, let me never, never
outlive my love for thee.

Jesus has a crisis in Gethsemane.

The crisis boiled down to a question: Was this the only way?
Could there be different way?

This isn't quiet, gentle prayer. This is raging, questioning,
desperate prayer.

We are never honest if we only ever talk of prayer in serene and
bright tones.

I know that many of us have gone through these last few weeks
feeling anxious, confused and lonely. Some have relished the
isolation whilst others have struggled with it. These are hard
days.

Surely this account of Jesus is one of the most precious we have
in scripture. At his deepest point of need, when hardly
anything seemed to make sense, when questions filled his mind
and he felt so alone – Jesus does not walk away from God, but
instead, turns to God and prays.

Our world is suffering this Easter.

One way to see it and go through it is to believe God's response
to suffering isn't so much an answer but a presence. His
presence, to stand alongside us, to hold us, and share the

suffering with us.

There is just a hint at Gethsemane that Jesus found a certain equilibrium as he prayed – enough of one, at least, to face the cross.

Perhaps the battle of today – Good Friday – was won yesterday – on Maundy Thursday by Jesus in a garden called Gethsemane.

Today

I think we probably underestimate Pilate.

At first glance he seems to be a weak and often manipulated leader, bowing to the influence of his wife or the demands of the mob ranting below his palace window. I'm not sure how he would have stood up to Laura Kuennsberg at the No 10 daily briefings.

Yet, maybe he knew exactly what he was doing and just maybe he had caught on to the essence of Jesus' message.

Crucifixion was a mandatory Roman sentence for enemies of the state, and I think that's inevitably how Pilate saw Jesus. For on his desk would be reports from those who spied on him whilst in the temple. *Rendering unto Caesar that which is Caesar's* was hardly a ringing endorsement of the Emperor's authority and actually it dismissed, almost with ridicule, that cherished Roman notion that the Emperor was a sort of god.

Pilate was right – Jesus was a subversive, he was an enemy of the state – to those who lived according to the rules he was

deserving of crucifixion.

So Pilate sentences Jesus – but gives the impression such a judgement was forced on him by the crowd.

Jesus dies because his message of love and justice threatened the authorities and was misunderstood by the populous.

Yet it is a message that has never gone away, and over these recent weeks our fears and anxieties have been tempered and subdued by stories of dedication, compassion and courage. Stories of love in action.

The cross is not there in order that God might change his mind about us, but that we might come to understand God. The God, who in Christ, never gives up on us, stands alongside us in love.

This Easter we applaud, value and celebrate that sort of love wherever we find it.

The suffering of Jesus, on this day we call Good Friday, is a sacrament of divine love and today such love comforts, challenges and inspires us.

Tomorrow

Resolution is so attractive.

As we come to the end of a piece of music we long to hear a cadence that will bring it to a comfortable close – without that we are left in limbo, no que for applause, no sense of satisfaction that we can turn off the radio and get on with the next task.

We long, of course we long, for this pandemic to be behind us, yet we all sense that we still have a long way to go.

‘Resolution’ is not what Holy Saturday is about.

Jesus’ body has been lovingly taken down and he is buried with quiet dignity in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

And then – nothing. The tomb is closed, sealed and guarded.

Is this how it all ends? It looks like it.

The narrative is in suspension. We know of another ending, yet on Holy Saturday this seemed, to those who lived it, to be the ending.

Part of the gift to us every Easter weekend is that realisation of Saturday, in between Friday and Sunday.

Perhaps never before, in most of our lifetimes at least, have we lived through days that feel so much like Holy Saturday.

Before the message of the angels dressed in dazzling attire, before the joy of running disciples or those who saw a different future as a stranger warmed their hearts and broke bread with them at sunset – before all that spoke and hinted of resolution – there is waiting, and wondering, and questioning, and silence, and yet more waiting.

May God grant us courage and peace this Spring as we wait. Always knowing and trusting that God, in his great love, waits alongside us.