

**3 April 2022**

**Fifth Sunday of Lent – Isaiah 43.16-21, John 12.1-8**

***(Also known as Passion Sunday, the week before Palm Sunday)***

*May these words and the meditation of each of our hearts be acceptable to the Lord, our Strength, and our Redeemer, Amen.*

I remember contributing to the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent (just over two years ago on 29 March 2020) sermon text during our first national lockdown, and here we are once again thinking about the beginning of Passiontide. I wrote then:

*“Emptying and filling, moving on with new life, not moaning about the loss (though that is wholly legitimate) and NOT allowing the situation to overtake us such that we are completely powerless, is I think what we need at this critical time of Covid-19 pandemic both nationally and globally. Life is almost at a standstill, let alone us seeing any signs of new life for the foreseeable future.*

*Daily for the past couple of weeks we are confronted with an exponential rate of deaths especially in neighbouring Italy and Spain, following on from the initial outbreak in central China. The real fear is that the U.K. will experience in a fortnight’s time what Italy is currently facing. Also, we are overloaded with a massive amount of health-related and other information coming from various quarters, through the power of the media and the internet. To cap it all, our unusually sombre Prime Minister issued a stark message to the nation “To stay at home” to contain the spread of viral infections.*

*While the pandemic is gripping humankind globally, it is tempting to forget that conflicts and displacements continue to take place on a massive scale. The geo-political and humanitarian crises that loom in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and the Mediterranean do not simply disappear because they have not been screened onto our comfortable living rooms.”*

Well, here we today, we are no longer at a standstill, the world’s problems haven’t gone away even though we have now let down our guard as if the virus (with its various strains) has disappeared. Life is back to normal for many, despite the increase in infection rates throughout the North East and hospital admissions for Covid patients have not abated either.

What seems to be normal as ever is the constant flow of refugees, and this past month from the dire situation of the Russia-Ukraine War, while dreading the prospect of any biological or chemical warfare or even a nuclear confrontation! We are now dealing with millions who are on the move and Ukraine’s neighbours are bearing the brunt of the flow and care of mothers, children, older folks, the disabled and critically ill, while many of the able-bodied men (fathers, sons, brothers, uncles) and some women (including those already serving in the forces) have remained to form the hitherto surprisingly fierce resistance against the advancing Russian army.

Also, we should never delude ourselves that the imposed economic sanctions will hit only Russia. In our inter-dependent global capitalist systems, no one is ever immune from the effects of concerted decisions and actions from any bloc.

Within all that turmoil, how do we say to ourselves, “Let God take control once again”. This is easier said than done. Yet, most ironically, we have the two Eastern Orthodox churches sanctioning/supporting their regimes in their mutual conflict - what does it say about the complexity of human and church relations now let alone the one God in whom we put our trust? Ecumenically speaking, as far as Ukraine and Russia are concerned, it seems like we are right in the depths of winter, not spring or summer! Thus, prompting Rowan Williams’s timely letter to *The Times* at the start of the conflict:

'Sir, Last weekend Orthodox Christians in many countries celebrated 'Forgiveness Sunday', the day before Great Lent begins. Many will have hoped to hear from the Orthodox Church in Russia some acknowledgement of the shocking - not to say blasphemous - absurdity of Orthodox Christians engaging, at this season of all seasons, in indiscriminate killing of the innocent, insanely reckless attacks on nuclear facilities (endangering their own homeland as well as the wider environment), the unashamed breach of ceasefire agreements, and an attack on one of the most significant Holocaust memorials in Europe.

It is not too late for the leadership of the Church in Russia to call for (at the very least) a credible ceasefire as Lent begins. Those of us who owe a lasting debt to the thought and witness of Christian Russia through the centuries find it hard to believe that all the moral norms of warfare painstakingly explored by Christians in both East and West from the earliest ages onward have been forgotten.

The Rt Reverend Lord Williams of Oystermouth, Archbishop of Canterbury 2002-2012'

One of the hardest challenges for our Christian discipleship is first and foremost to acknowledge that God is still in charged of us and of his created order. These are times especially when this foundational reality of our faith proves difficult to grasp.

In Isaiah’s days (Chapter 43), we hear how God addressed his people:

<sup>18</sup>Do not remember the former things,  
or consider the things of old.

<sup>19</sup>I am about to do a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
I will make a way in the wilderness  
and rivers in the desert.

The prophet was prophesying a restoration to God’s people who have been in exile and servitude to Babylon. Now there is the hope of deliverance and the prospect of re-building in their own land and especially the city of Jerusalem.

The prophet goes further to prophesy a restoration of the harmony of all creation:

<sup>20</sup> The wild animals will honour me,  
 the jackals and the ostriches;  
 for I give water in the wilderness,  
 rivers in the desert,  
 to give drink to my chosen people,  
<sup>21</sup> the people whom I formed for myself  
 so that they might declare my praise.

Our Gospel lesson contains a prophecy of the Passion. Mary had already grasped that Jesus's sacrificial death is an essential part of his work. Her anointing is a prophetic act that is costly (300 denarii would be nearly a year's wages for a labourer) and courageous, both in financial terms and in the criticism that it attracts. And yet it is an act that she feels compelled to undertake, to prepare Jesus for his coming crucifixion.

Mary's excessive and extravagant gesture is an act of love and is like the excessive amount of water turned into wine at the wedding in Cana (earlier on the Gospel of John). This is to indicate very clearly for John's hearers that God's love for us is not limited by any form of rational calculation. Both the miracle at Cana and Mary's gesture prefigures the foolishness and scandal of Christ's self-offering that is at the same time, mysteriously beautiful.

Little wonder that Jesus dismisses Judas Iscariot's objection that was made in bad faith. Judas had completely taken his eyes off the ball! Isn't that the sort of attitude that lingers often in the Church today? We can be so concerned with our own financial survival that we lose sight of our true mission for God's world.

<sup>7</sup> Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup> You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

*"In the paschal mystery, Christ stands among those robbed of all worldly power and status, showing this to be the very heart of his Kingdom. This transformation of values has far greater implications for the social and material status of the poorest. It demands that they are treated not simply as objects of charitable giving, but as bearers of the divine image. While all human beings bear God's image, in the light of the cross we can rightly speak of a particular resemblance between the poorest and their Lord."* (Angus Ritchie)

We do well to bear this in mind when the UK finally begins to receive Ukrainian refugees for the 100,000-plus who have volunteered as hosts.

So, on this Passion Sunday, as we walk with Jesus on his final journey towards Jerusalem, towards his eventual torturous death by capital punishment, we think of the millions who have died and have been maimed and displaced because of the conflicts that are still raging. We need to remember also in the UK alone the more than 150,000 who have mortally succumbed to the viral pandemic, besides millions in other parts of the world added together.

Passion Sunday is also the occasion when we begin to reflect on how Jesus himself prepared to meet death. It also raises some deep questions, including how might we confront evil? At the same time, we are mindful of the need to care for the dispossessed and vulnerable within our communities.

**But, most of all, we ask how we might experience this “new thing” that Christ has fulfilled on the cross transforming every aspect of our current earthly existence.**

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## TODAY’S LESSONS

**Isaiah 43:16-21** New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised

<sup>16</sup> Thus says the LORD,  
 who makes a way in the sea,  
 a path in the mighty waters,  
<sup>17</sup> who brings out chariot and horse,  
 army and warrior;  
 they lie down, they cannot rise,  
 they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:  
<sup>18</sup> Do not remember the former things,  
 or consider the things of old.  
<sup>19</sup> I am about to do a new thing;  
 now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
 I will make a way in the wilderness  
 and rivers in the desert.  
<sup>20</sup> The wild animals will honour me,  
 the jackals and the ostriches;  
 for I give water in the wilderness,  
 rivers in the desert,  
 to give drink to my chosen people,  
<sup>21</sup> the people whom I formed for myself  
 so that they might declare my praise.

**John 12:1-8** New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised

**12** Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup> There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. <sup>3</sup> Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. <sup>4</sup> But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup> ‘Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?’ <sup>6</sup> (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) <sup>7</sup> Jesus said, ‘Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup> You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.’