

29/3/20 Passion Sunday St: Peter's Lutton Place

We hope all of you are managing through these difficult times.

That those who are alone can keep in touch by phone and the other wonders of modern technology.

That those who should not leave the house have friends and neighbours to bring them all they need.

That those who are ill find the health service to help them and the courage to face whatever comes.

That those whose income has suddenly dropped will find the resources to buy what they need.

That all who fear for loved ones or themselves may find the means to help and the courage to come through.

Kristee, Janet and others have been setting up a buddy system so that we can keep in touch with one another and provide help where needed.

Please don't hesitate to get in touch with any member of the congregation who will help or pass on your need.

The magazine comes out this Sunday and we will distribute as widely as we are able with all the present restrictions.

The readings this week are: (See separate sheet)

Ezekiel 37. 1-14

The wonderful image of the dry bones scattered across the fearful desert being brought together and rising to life.

Romans 8. 6-11

Paul talks of the life of the Spirit,

John 11. 1-45

The raising of Lazarus

A prayer or meditation for the start of Passiontide:

Loving Father, Holy Mother, we are today fearful of our future, separated from many whom we love. May we think of Jesus, drawing away from so much he felt dear, determined to head for Jerusalem where danger would surround him, where friends would desert him, where pain would enfold him.

We think of our world, threatened by warming; of our society, threatened by this virus; of our friends and family, some enduring illness, dementia, broken relationships, depression – how can they, how can we bare it? We see in this Church season, that our faith is not an escape to a land where all is easy but an invitation to walk with you, to seek your courage, to know your hope that through this dark valley all will be well.

May we use this Passiontide to seek what is truly important, to see beyond the 'accidents' of daily life with their joy and their despair, their sickness and health, their wealth and poverty, and discover the "substance" of your presence and your love.

May we know ourselves to be your children, created to rise above the trials and tribulations that challenge us so seriously to find the life and freedom and love that make it bearable, remembering Jesus rising above the trials of Passiontide

In our Year's Mind this week, we pray for: David Crichton, Helen McDonald, Eva Rogers, Bill Henderson, David Flenley, Mary Scott, Joan Toyne.

My address for this week:

I spent some time wondering what to say about our present situation – there could be a great deal as demonstrated by our television and papers! But the Church is also called to look beyond the particular to the deeper purpose of life.

Let me start with Paul in today's reading: "To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace". People have long argued about what Paul meant by flesh and spirit but there was, when he wrote, a theory from the time of Aristotle about substance and accidents. The Catholic view of transubstantiation, changing the bread and wine in the Communion service has argued about this. Do the accidents, what we would call the chemical reality, change, or is it the substance, what the thing really is to us, that changes?

Think of a child's teddy bear: to anyone else it is just a cuddly toy – it might be attractive or ugly, there are hundreds of others like it. But to the child it is special, no other bear is like it. It has a reality in that child's mind that makes it different to any other bear. Its accidents may be the same as other bears, but its substance, what it is to that child, is very different.

Well, I'm not sure that helps understand Paul's flesh and spirit or the Catholic Church's view of Communion, or indeed if it would be approved by either of them, but I do think we need a way of recognising that there is a physical reality, but also some kind of spiritual or psychological reality, something that gives a deeper meaning to life, and is real, true and important.

I want to suggest that in the Church year today, the start of Passiontide, we mark a change in perspective – rather like thinking of the substance rather than the accidents. We are called to move from justice to self-giving; from equality to service; from political reality to utopian vision. It is the time to leave behind an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth, and embrace turning the other cheek, walking the second mile. For this is what the religious quest is fundamentally about – it calls us to go beyond what is fair and just and reasonable into the territory of risk and vulnerability.

This is not an easy shift as the disciples knew. We have to live in the physical world of cause and effect; in the political world of the strong exercising power over the weak; in the social world with our responsibilities for family and those close to us. Surely we need to tell our idealistic selves to get real.

Well, I do recognise that long before we get to the Christian values of grace, mercy, service, forgiveness, sacrifice and so on there is a good deal to be done simply bringing justice into our relationships. Establishing equality for all before the law, common justice would be an enormous leap forward for our world. To have some minimal safety net for everyone who is unable to find shelter, food, health care or education for themselves would be great. But we say, political and social policy must depend on what is possible, what we can afford, what we see to be in everyone's interest. I don't deny that reality but would still wish to argue.

I'd argue that if justice and equality are the final goal we will always be looking for ways to grab an advantage for ourselves,

to interpret the law as best suits us. I will search for ways in which the law will benefit me or my interests. This was Paul's great insight: that we must move beyond the law into the realm of grace. I'm sure the philosophers would say it's nonsense but I find it helpful to think of 'political reality' as the accidents while the ideal of loving is the substance – and the substance is the really important thing.

There have always been some individuals who live in the realm of Christ-centred generosity. Indeed most of us, on occasion, have risen to that kind of loving with people who are close to us. It is by the example of those saintly people and by those personal moments, that we are challenged to see justice and fairness as only the basic starting point.

The Good News of the Christian Gospel is that God is NOT a 'just' God. A just God would simply impose the laws of cause and effect, of crime and punishment, of an eye for an eye. The good news is that God, as we will see in this next fortnight, is not just, but loving – and that is a very different thing.

So, in the great debates which dominate our news – the danger of global warming or the cost to millions of coronavirus – we will not simply struggle in our own self-interest but aim for what is just and fair to both ourselves and our neighbours. I think we would all agree that would be good. But might we go beyond that? Might those on the front line risk more than most of us; might those whose jobs or pensions are safe help those whose income is greatly decreased? Might we need to broaden our view of what is fair? It is the saints on the edges who can shame the institution into behaving more justly. It is those

willing to walk the 2nd mile who encourage the rest of us to walk the first.

As we have examined our lives through Lent we may have aimed to live more justly, fairly or even generously; but in Passiontide now we are called to look at Jesus and see a different level of living – with forgiveness, sacrifice, mercy and love. These are the qualities that can really bring change. If our aim is only to keep the law we simply guarantee lawyers a good living. If we aim for what is possible, living with the 'accidents' we will be missing out on what is really important for our full humanity. But if our aim is to love God and to love our neighbour (though we will all fall short of that) we will make less fuss about our rights and think more of others.

I want to end with two quotations: first from Mahatma Gandhi:
"To fail to struggle against the evil of the world is to surrender your humanity:

To struggle against the evil of the world with the weapons of the evil-doer is to enter into your humanity:

To struggle against the evil of the world with the weapons of God is to enter into your divinity."

And a verse from a George Herbert hymn:

*A man may look on glass,
on it may stay his eye;
Or if he pleaseth through it pass
and then the heaven espy.*

May we look beyond the accidents to find the real substance of our humanity.