

Passion Sunday, The Fifth Sunday of Lent, Year B, 2021

Hebrew 5.5-10; Ps 119.9-16; John 12.20-33

Today is Passion Sunday. We are at a turning point in our Lenten observance as we turn our faces towards Golgotha, the Place of the Skull. We are at a turning point in John's gospel signalled by some Greeks coming to Jerusalem requesting to see Jesus. These Greeks and their question are the trigger for Jesus to announce that the hour has come for him the Son (capital S) to be glorified - to be glorified by his being lifted up from the earth. The Greeks represent the whole world whose interest has been aroused by this strange Jewish figure. To see Jesus they must go to Jerusalem, this most Jewish of Jewish cities. The city of post-exilic Judaism clustered around the Temple rituals being serviced by priests and a scribal community (a learned community). A city which was a not multi-ethnic, multi-religious, but very much the Jewish city par excellence. It is to this city the Greeks make their way to see Jesus. They may have been proselytes, enquirers into the ways of the Living God. The God of the I am who I am. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This God so unlike their gods...

What caught my attention is that Jesus and the Greeks according to John never meet. If they did the conversation between them is lost. To stress their coming to the disciples and the passing on of the Greeks' request is a trigger. Now Jesus is to be glorified. This is the hour. Now he will be lifted up from the earth to draw all people to himself. It is Jesus who draws all people and he draws them to himself. The 'all people', the 'everyone', 'the whole world' these are fundamental to our understanding of who Jesus is, as we regularly acclaim. "He is the Saviour of the world". This is the uncomfortable truth that we must witness to for the sake of the world and as we follow and serve. I cannot but be reminded of what Paul, the Apostle, wrote to the church in Corinth.

"For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." (1 Cor. 1.22-25)

The sign given is Jesus lifted up on the cross. A sign of defeat. The old ways annihilate the new way. The wisdom looking back to last Sunday's Mothering Sunday epistle is to put on Christ, which is to put on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, but above all to put on love that binds everything together in perfect harmony. This love requires, it demands the living out of forgiveness. "...as the Lord has forgiven you. So you must also forgive". There is no "wenn und aber". There are no ifs and buts.

Let me recall what the author Michel Faber calls this compendium of books, the Bible. He calls it *The Book of New Strange Things*. The story of God and this God's dealings with humanity are a strange story, making for a strange new way as Paul, the Apostle acknowledges. Growing up as a Jew in a Gentile world he would have been familiar with the God of the Covenants, but that a New Covenant should be based on Jesus' being lifted up from the earth is a stretch.

We can tell from John's text that the meaning of Jesus' lifting up was disputed. Some people thought it meant not so much the kind of death he was to die, but rather his resurrection. Let's keep the Evangelist's interpretative remark in mind as we consider the whole of Christ's passion. A road we will walk again in these coming days with differing degrees of intensity from the casual glance of the bystander to the deeply engaged religious.

Let me stop here for a moment with the bystanders. There have been times in my life, when there is just so much to do or a crisis or a personal concern claiming my attention that what is going on in the world passes me by. I am not proud or comfortable acknowledging this. I am like a bystander who glances briefly up from the task in hand taking note superficially of what is going on. Let me press the stop button again. What is going on in the world... That is a loaded phrase. Do we really know what is going on? Let me say that our news is shaped. This is obvious. It is shaped in such a way that we give ourselves often too happily and readily to the narrative that is being shaped. This is true for those who stay with the more established media as well as those who concern

themselves with the alternative media of today. We are not always protected. Once again I am reminded of the legend of the Pied Piper of Hameln. Who is the piper today? Who will we follow?

Christians regardless of denominational loyalty or preference are often too easily and too readily being shaped by one secular narrative or by its many alternatives. Our faith is a critical apparatus. It can shield us from being led into a new bondage and being pinned down like Gulliver. Our prayer is always let us walk with Christ and in Christ from untruth into truth, from bondage into freedom, from illusion into reality, from sin into life.

It is a sadness that all religious people are simply lumped together from the most brilliant of minds and those of moral rectitude accompanied by intentional action to the fanatics, as well as the deceivers of today. And how easily fundamental Christian positions are simply being set aside, disqualified by some derogatory remark about 'religious' people. No voice for us in the public debate, so it would seem. Our brothers and sisters in the faith don't always make it easy... to communicate well with people who have legitimate questions, who harbour doubts or with the wider discourse of society. Simply asserting you believe this or that may help you, but it doesn't necessarily help the doubter, the seeker or the conversation.

God is turned to the world. Jesus is turned to the world. Today's Gospel reminds us forcefully that people want to see Jesus. They want to see him today. And they will see Jesus. They will see him lifted up. They will see him nailed to the tree. The victim of betrayal, of injustice, of false accusation and of power. The power of Rome. The power of the religious Jewish establishment in the most Jewish of cities. Jerusalem meaning City of Peace... We may see him as a victim only, but he is also agent as we heard for instance on Mothering Sunday, "Here is your mother. Here is your son." Creating community. "Not my will be done, but yours." Willing obedience to the Father's will.

Returning to the assertion that Jesus's proclamation of his being lifted up is disputed I direct our attention to John's note at the end of today's reading. He writes that Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die: crucifixion meaning literally, "fixed to a cross". A death based on public display, humiliation, excruciating pain as seven inch nails were driven into wrists and ankles, lasting up to 24 hours and ending by asphyxiation.

The other day I had to check myself independently of today's reading. I had to pinch myself reminding myself that when Jesus says "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" he is speaking of his death and not referring to his resurrection, which he does elsewhere in the Gospels. We today are nourished by the resurrection that we may have life, so that we can live through the Passion and through Good Friday. But our resurrection remembering can obscure the cross. Our telling of the Jesus story can obscure the horror of the cross. We need to hold Christ's passion, his being lifted up from the earth in tension with that first Easter morn - a different sort of lifting.

To repeat: The passion and death of Christ need to be held together simultaneously with his resurrection – held in a lasting and ultimately creative tension. This is a tension we must be persevering in. It is continuing. It is ongoing. It is central to our confession. We must face the reality of the pain, the suffering, the sorrow and the death of Good Friday, because this our reality. It is not only our reality, it is also the reality of tens of millions of people. Recall the Armenian genocide. Recall the Shoah. Recall the Rwandan genocide. Recall the Killing Fields of Cambodia. Recall the person diagnosed with cancer. Recall the parent who hears the news that a beloved daughter has gone missing. Recall the falsely accused.

I hold up to all of us the crucifix not as a thing of artistic and cultural beauty housed securely in the KHM to be viewed during opening hours, but as the horror that it is everyday, the reality of our world and lives lived openly and honestly. Jesus did not stem himself against the Father's will – he was obedient so that the world might believe In Him.

His example humbles me. He committed no sin. It was not an eye for an eye, a tooth for tooth way of life that was born that day.

As we move towards Good Friday consider words from the Scroll of the Prophet Isaiah that we shall hear,

But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed. (Isaiah 53.5)

It was for us. It was for all. It was for everyone. It was for the world. It was for all time. This is a strange new thing and our lives are lived in its light. Let me end with words from the Psalmist seeing the sun mentioned as the Light of the World who illuminates and gives life to all that it is.

In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun.
It is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber,
like a champion rejoicing to run his course.
It rises at one end of the heavens
and makes its circuit to the other;
nothing is deprived of its warmth. (Psalm 19.4b-6)

The passion of Christ and its ending: Good Friday. Christ lifted up. We behold our Lord.