

Sermon preached at St. Mary & St Nicholas, Littlemore on Good Friday 2007**Readings: Isaiah 52, v12 – Isaiah 53 end; Hebrews 4 & 5; John 18 & 19.**

“He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”

Less than a week ago, on Palm Sunday we processed through the village following Princess, the Donkey, with our brothers and sisters from Blessed Dominic Barberi Church and Littlemore Baptist Church singing “Hosannah to the Son of David!” We cheered Jesus as our long-awaited Messiah, to be crowned King of Israel. But already dark clouds were gathering over our celebrations. Our palm leaves were twisted into crosses, and in the dramatic reading of the Gospel, instead of defending Jesus at his trial, we were shouting: “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

This is an upside-down world, in which truth is taken for a lie and lies have become truth: Pilate cannot find a crime that Jesus has committed, but he gives in to our cries. He asks Jesus: “What is truth?” But Pilate has the truth standing before him, an innocent man, but he washes his hands of him. We, the crowd are offered the choice between releasing the notorious criminal Barrabas or the innocent man, Jesus, but rather than see justice done, we buy for Jesus’ blood. In this broken world, violence leads to further violence, in an inexorable cycle inevitably leading towards death. Jesus, the Lord who rode in triumph into Jerusalem becomes the target of our mockery, cursing and hatred:

George Herbert’s poem *The Sacrifice* includes the following verses:

Ah, how they scourge Me! Yet My tenderness
Doubles each lash: and yet their bitterness
Winds up my grief to a mysteriousness:
Was ever grief like Mine?

They buffet Me, and box Me as they list,
Who grasp the earth and heaven with my fist,
And yet, whom I would punish, miss’ d:
Was ever grief like Mine?

Behold, they spit on Me in scornful wise,
 Who by My spittle gave the blind man eyes,
 Leaving his blindness to My enemies:
Was ever grief like Mine?

At the centre of this story, **Jesus stands alone**. His friends have deserted him and the world has turned against him. More than that, he is innocent while everyone else is caught up in deception, denial and murder. Jesus answers: "If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong, But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?"

Jesus is different from everyone else in the story. Obviously he is different from his accusers, as he speaks the truth. But he is also different from his disciples: they abandon him. Peter compromises with the truth and forgets the way of love that Jesus has taught and denies knowing him. Jesus never denies what he has said or done. Peter turns to violence: He strikes off the ear of the high priest's servant. Jesus rebukes him.

Jesus says to Pilate: "If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." Jesus is telling us that his way is not the way of this world. *Our* natural response to the events of Jesus' arrest and trial are those Peter; *God's* response is different.

Why does God let Jesus be condemned to death and crucified. He was mocked: "Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!" Shouldn't we plead with God to save him? Don't these God-murderers deserve of the worst punishment and death that can be devised?

But against all this, **Jesus stands alone**. The poem continues:

And now I am deliver'd unto death,
 Which each one calls for so with utmost breath,
 That he before Me well nigh suffereth:
Was ever grief like Mine?

Weep not, not dear friends, since I for both hath wept
 When all My tears were blood, the while you slept:
 Your tears for your own fortunes should be kept:
Was ever grief like Mine?

Jesus recognises that he is in a world caught up in a dreadful web of deceit and death. When we were born, we were born into a world where the innocent are killed and the guilty are free to do their worst – a world which rejoices in the cycles of violence that it brings upon itself.

In the Passion of our Lord, we see the same cycle of violence, the same pattern of injustice, but with one difference: the victim is God. In order for God to lead us out of this Hell, he must descend into it. In order to show us God's way, Jesus must take the path to the Cross, to be tortured to death.

The poem continues:

O all ye who pass by, behold and see:
Man stole the fruit, but I must climb the tree;
The tree of life to all, but only Me:
Was ever grief like Mine?

Lo, here I hang, charged with a world of sin,
The greater world o' the two; for that came in
By words, but this by sorrow I must win:
Was ever grief like Mine?

God is showing us a way out of our sin. He is breaking the cycle of wrongs, in which we pass the hurts and wounds that we have received on to others. He is showing us a better way. From the Cross, Jesus is showing us God's love, which changes the world. Through his suffering he is showing us that we can become part of his love. God's love is truly greater than anything which the world can throw against it.

Yet the Son of God suffers with us. He says to those at the foot of the Cross: "I am thirsty". This is the only place in the Passion story, in St John's Gospel, that we hear of Christ's suffering. It stands in place of Jesus' cry in Mark and Matthew, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" John is reminding us that Jesus is also human, he is not immune to suffering. He is innocent but he suffers for us and with us. It is this suffering, this agonising death, that draws us to him. Earlier in St John's Gospel, Jesus said: "When I am lifted up from the earth, then I will draw all people to myself". This is how he does it.

The poem continues:

They gave Me vinegar mingled with gall,
But more with malice: yet, when they did call,
With Manna, Angels' food, I fed them all:
Was ever grief like Mine?

Nay, after death their spite shall further go:
For they will pierce My side, I full well know;
That as sin came, so Sacraments might flow:
Was ever grief like Mine?

But now I die; all is finished.
My woe, man's weal: and now I bow my head.
Only let others say, when I am dead,
Never was grief like Mine?

As we approach to venerate the Cross, full of sorrow, let us remember his pleading. We must not turn away: we are his people. We must not reject him: he will never reject us.