

## **Passiontide**

As well as being the 5th Sunday of Lent, today is also known as Passion Sunday. Different churches and different traditions will make different things of how Passion Sunday is known and celebrated.

The word passion comes with many meanings, but we may first think of something along the lines of strong and almost uncontrollable emotions and love. Certainly, love is at the centre of the Church's use of the word 'passion' but the word in this context comes from the Latin word 'Passio', which means suffering. Therefore, Passion Sunday marks the beginning of Passiontide – or suffering time – that time where Christians accompany Jesus to the cross, which is now firmly in view for him in our Bible readings, and for us as a Church in our worship.

Suffering is regarded as a *bad* intrusion into what was created as a *good* world, and it comes in many forms. It is something that has and continues to touch all of us. Passiontide reminds us more than ever, that we believe that, however difficult it is to understand, God suffers with us.

### **A suffering Jesus**

*Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say — “Father, save me from this hour”?* These words spoken by Jesus show us the very natural, and human, reaction to the moment we receive bad news.

The appearance of the Greeks, and they're asking to see Jesus, seems to have been a significant moment in the way Jesus realises that a particular point in his life and ministry has been reached. The Greeks were perhaps a representation that Jesus was now being looked to by those outside his immediate group of followers. Those whose worship lay just outside the established bounds of Judaism. The message had got out and people had started to take a serious interest. Therefore, the next phase was about to begin. And this would be the most

difficult one so far. Jesus was about to suffer, he knew this, and he struggled with it.

## **A suffering God**

Although the Jesus of the New Testament clearly suffered with human emotions and died, for hundreds of years the Church struggled with the thought that God could actually suffer. As Hebrews says, it was 'in the days of flesh' that Jesus 'offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears'.

But surely God the Father, the Creator, was beyond the natural order and was perfect and unchangeable. To accept that this God could suffer was to admit that God was changeable and therefore *imperfect*. The many biblical passages that refer to God suffering were metaphors and not literal. The God to whom we pray might show us compassion, kindness and mercy but doesn't really feel what we feel or struggle with what we struggle.

If this were the case, then how could God really know what we are going through when we suffer?

But the letter to the Hebrews also claims that Jesus and the Father had the closest possible connection – Jesus was the imprint in our world of God's heavenly nature. So when Jesus suffered, God suffered.

And if God the Father is not able to feel our suffering for Godself than can God truly love us? Love does after all make us vulnerable. When someone we love suffers, we suffer with them. When someone we love is happy, we feel that sense of happiness as well.

One theologian, Jürgen Moltmann put it like this:

“A God who cannot suffer is poorer than any human. For a God who is incapable of suffering is a being who cannot be involved. Suffering and injustice will not affect him. And because he is so

completely insensitive, he cannot be affected or shaken by anything, he cannot weep, for he has no tears. But the one who cannot suffer cannot love either.”

The Bible tells us that God is love, everything in the Bible is held together by God's love, the fact that we are here today is because of God's love. The life and story of Jesus is a physical demonstration of God's love. So God can, and indeed does, suffer when we and all the creation suffers. Passiontide reminds us, and assures us, of this.

### **Our suffering**

We have all had our own particular experiences akin to Jesus being visited by ‘the Greeks’. Perhaps a letter from a hospital, or a phone call from a family member, or a knock at the door bringing bad news in one or many forms, which leads to the beginning of a time of suffering.

But our faith leads to our hope. All three readings today bring us the good news as well. In the new covenant that Jeremiah spoke about everyone shall know God intimately. This was an important message for those in Israel and Judah to hear, because soon they would be in exile and suffering greatly. Hebrews talks about eternal salvation for all those who obey Christ; and Jesus himself of course says that through his suffering will come God's glory, a glory which will draw all people to himself.

Our hope is founded in that God accompanies us in love *through* our suffering. Just as God suffered on the Cross, God knows and feels exactly what you feel.

And it isn't just about us as individuals either. As Saint Paul wrote to the Romans, the whole Creation groans under the present suffering. They would have seen this principally about being persecuted for their faith, but today I think that a groaning creation

speaks about the environmental crisis that our planet is undergoing.

And if this is something that you particularly care about, as indeed all Christians should be, then do think about coming to our lent conversations on Wednesday evening or Thursday afternoon when we discuss the churches 5th mark of mission “to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth”. This is our charge to show our love for God and God's creation by helping the planet and its inhabitants as it and they suffer.

## **Response**

So, may this Passion Sunday and Passiontide be seen not just as marking and remembering events which took place 2000 years ago but as a reminder and an assurance of God’s love for us and knowledge and experience of our individual and collective suffering.

May we see it as a reminder and assurance that God will be, and is, alongside us in the joys and pains of life, knowing how we feel and facing it with us, and will remain so, right up until that moment that we turn and look upon God’s glory, fully, clearly and face-to-face. Amen

Rev. Richard Haynes 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent/Passion Sunday 17 March  
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