

Passion Sunday. 5th Sunday in Lent.

Readings Jeremiah 31 v 31 - 34 Hebrews 5 v 5 - 10 John 12 v 20 - 23.

In some church traditions the 5th Sunday is referred to as Passion Sunday and it marks the beginning of Passion tide. The time when the church, through readings and prayers, recalls the journey of Christ to the cross.

Jeremiah is one of the tortured souls of the Old Testament in being given the impossible task of delivering a message that no one wants to hear. If the nation does not mend its ways and repent, it will be destroyed and the people taken into exile. In delivering the message, Jeremiah's life was constantly in danger, or he was totally ignored. Yet in spite of this, he still kept delivering his message. Anyone else would have been tempted to have walked away but he did not. He even bought a field demonstrating his faith in the prophecies of God. For Jeremiah, his concern was for the Jewish nation to repent and turn back to God. For God it is ultimately the whole world he is calling, not just Israel. This comes through the cross, a symbol of shame, in that Jesus fulfilled the promise.

However, in these weeks leading up to Good Friday and Easter, events and lessons can be lost if we just concentrate on the cross. Much has got to be done and said beforehand. In the reading from John, we see some Greeks seeking Jesus out. They may be non-Jews who may be attracted to the Jewish faith. Perhaps for them it is offering something much deeper than the stories of Greek gods. Or perhaps they are just inquisitive. They have heard stories about Jesus and they just want to meet him. They want to find out what he has got to say for himself. If we read 1 Corinthians chapter 1 v 22, Paul says Jews demand signs and Greeks demand wisdom but we proclaim Christ crucified. It was the Greeks who encouraged and honoured the great philosophers. They loved to talk theories and ideas. So as Greeks did they come for a discussion? Who knows, but they must have convinced Philip enough for him to tell Andrew and together they went to Jesus. The response from Jesus may seem quite odd on the face of it. Nothing is said of any conversation that may have taken place and we do not hear of the men again. However for Jesus, the introduction brings into focus the realisation that his end is very near.

As the passage goes on Jesus says unless a grain falls to the ground and dies it can only remain a single grain. He knew by his death that the gospel would become universal, but it cannot happen until he has paid the unlimited sacrifice. A daunting prospect and one that I do not think any of us could take on lightly. Nevertheless, Jesus does not leave us out of this commitment. For as followers of Jesus it can demand a sacrifice from us. That we too, when taking on the faith of Christ, by being a follower, we will have to deny ourselves to find true fulfilment in our own lives.

Some years ago, whilst in South Korea visiting my son, I heard this story told in a church I attended. There was once a banker who got to the age of retirement and he decided instead of just putting his feet up he would buy a plot of land and have a small holding. His nextdoor neighbour was a man who was born and bred on the

land and wishing to welcome this new neighbour, he took him a gift of a bag of corn. The banker took the gift in the most honourable fashion, then promptly fed the corn to his chickens. The farmer was horrified, for he expected his neighbour to plant the corn and then in time that corn would produce more corn and so on. For the farmer it was an utter waste to give this corn to the chickens. What the banker and the farmer did not realise was that one was a farmer and other was not. The banker did not know how to farm and he was not willing to learn, it was just a nice idea. As the preacher went onto say, we often do not understand the commitment of the Christian faith. We can think it is only going to church on Sunday and in the week we can be like anyone else. But it is about giving our whole selves to God.

Jesus, by going to the Cross, committed himself to his Father. He was in obedience to the Father's will even if it meant death to himself. Dying to self means surrendering to God. In the reading from Hebrews, it says Jesus offered up prayers with loud cries and tears, as he surrendered to the Father's will. He was obedient unto death. The writer of Hebrews says he could do this because he was made perfect. Well as we all know we are not perfect and as human beings we find it very difficult to surrender our will. A religious sister once said to me, "poverty and chastity you get used to, but obedience is always a struggle". This is where the identification by Christ with us is our salvation, for he knows our weakness. There are times in our lives when the struggle is so hard we do not know how to carry the burden or pain. For instance, I have found lockdown really hard, as many of us have. I long for its end and it is only through the phone and friends I am surviving. Then there are times we may have a job to do, but it is so hard we want to give up, yet we still fail to go to God. We hold on to the burden so tightly we even make it part of ourselves, forgetting Jesus wants to share the load. In Matthew chapter 11 v 29 - 30, Jesus tell us "his yoke is easy and his burden is light", and even with that promise, to let go and let God is easier said than done. Yet even with our foolishness God is in the situation with us. Can we possibly imagine God's frustration with us?

You may know of the icon where two men are looking forward. One of the men is Jesus, the other just a man. Jesus has his arm around the man's shoulders pointing him forward as they walk down the road together. I always find the picture so helpful as it demonstrates very beautifully that Jesus is always with us. No, Jesus cannot always take the burden away but he points the way forward into the future. He knows our temptations, He's been there, done that, bought the t-shirt, and because of that he can help us and heal us. The only answer is continually coming to God and opening ourselves up to his will. What always surprises me, is the more we lose ourselves in God, the more we find ourselves and our freedom to be who we are meant to be. That is the grace of God. Nothing more nothing less. It is our healing and wholeness which comes through the love of God.

God bless you all
Angela.