

Passion Sunday, 6 April 2025

Readings: Isaiah 43.16-21, Psalm 126, Philippians 3.4b-14, John 12.1-8

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen. (Psalm 19.14)

The reading from the book of Isaiah invokes the image of the wilderness, which represents a place of austerity and hostility. It is a place of danger, lacking in food to eat and water to drink. In this environment the prophet, God's messenger says that it is in the wilderness the Lord God

"... will to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

It is the wilderness that the Lord God will transform. He

"will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.

The wild animals will honour me,
the jackals and the ostriches;

for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,

to give drink to my chosen people,
the people whom I formed for myself

so that they might declare my praise." (Isaiah 43.19-21)

Today is Passion Sunday alerting us that our focus as Christians needs now to turn to Christ's Passion - a bloody and excruciating event through which the new thing God promises will come. The horrors of the Passion are vividly captured in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of Christ (2004)*. It is not pretty. In the coming days we are invited to contemplate and dwell on the passion and death of Jesus, which is the death of Him in whom God was pleased to dwell and of whom John writes, "It is God's only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." (John 1.15) It is He who is close to the Father's heart who is betrayed, mocked, sentenced, scourged, humiliated, crucified and buried and then sealed in a tomb. In that sequence of

moments we see the love of God, who lays down his life for his friends. “You are my friends if you do what I command you.” (15.14)

My plea that we all keep at least Good Friday and Easter falls on deaf ears. Overall attendance figures speak volumes. Wanting glory but not suffering is humanly understandable, but in this week of remembrance there are no short cuts. Easter and Good Friday are intertwined. They are inextricably linked. They belong together. To repeat a familiar phrase, “You can’t have one without the other.” The collect for the Third Sunday of Lent (Common Worship) captures the dichotomy. “Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: ...” The tension captured here is the tension of our existence. In the midst of life we are in death. The keeping of Good Friday draws us close to the Christ, who takes us with him deeper into the heart of the Christian faith which we call mystery. How can it be? the hymn asks. How can it be that the Creator of all through passing through the portal of suffering and death becomes our salvation as captured in a line from a prayer, “your death brought life to the world”? The new thing!

The observance of Good Friday takes us into the suffering of the world at this present moment. We are not indifferent. Who can be left cold by the images of bombed cities with rubble piled high? Where once there was life there is now an eerie silence captured for us by images closer to home of unfinished high-risers in barren landscapes, or houses often in the Balkans started and never finished. For a time there was such a house behind the Lichtenstein Palais. Is it still there, I wonder? As a way is made through the rubble of these devastated cities we see life slowly returning. We see hundreds of people walking sometimes with a mule, always it would seem with bags through the rubble and the devastation. Who remained cold and indifferent to people being hauled away on scooters, pickup trucks? And people cheering the

abductors and then cheering themselves on celebrating a hollow victory. And then there were the stories filled with horror and fear, stories of rape and other crimes against humanity.

The weight of suffering and pain is real. The trauma is real. It took the Vietnam War for trauma to be officially recognised reluctantly (PTSD). We who experienced German schooling knew that a number of our teachers had been traumatised by the Second World War and we suffered some of the consequences of their trauma. The war left its mark as did a people being taken in by an ideology: Das Tausendjährige Reich. Such hyperbole is not uncommon today!

For the most part we can close ourselves off to present realities, but then something happens not in a far away place but at home, in the family, at school, at work, at church and the reality of pain, death and suffering comes cascading down upon us. It is through this wilderness in its horror, its depravity, and its despairing that He must go, through which the Passion takes us. In the Divine Comedy Dante's guides are Virgil and Beatrice. Virgil said to symbolise reason and wisdom, while Beatrice represents love. It is in the love of God made manifest in his appearing, in his sacrifice, in his offering that we embark on this journey into the darkness of the soul, the human condition and which leads us ultimately to the heavenly Jerusalem, the mother of us all. (Galatians 4:26)

Today's Gospel calls to mind an incident at the home of Lazarus, whom Jesus calls back into life. We are Lazarus. We too have been called into life, the abundant life Jesus gives. Martha and Mary are identified as his sisters. Martha true to form lives in the moment. She is seen doing something essential. She is serving. And we will like her all be called to service, but first we need to know why and how! Christian service is determined by the story that has been entrusted to us. But the story of Mary who

has chosen the better part has another chapter. She does something that causes upset. It causes accusations. Accusations that still divide believers. She buys costly nard. She pours the costly nard over Jesus' feet wiping them with her hair. A symbol of her love. Judas is quick to point out that the nard was costly – rather than being wasted, the nard could have been sold for the poor. Jesus comes to her defence with a stern, Leave her alone! Get off her case you bully! Jesus then goes on to clarify something that rings true and needs to be grasped however disturbing it sounds: "You always have the poor." He goes on to point out what this nard is for. It is for his imminent death. It anticipates what it is about to unfold. We know how the story ends. It ends with Jesus's death and his being sealed in a tomb.

The title of the Sci-Fi film "The day the earth stood still" captures in words the moment of Christ's death. And for a moment which will seem like eternity (poets to the fore!) he hung on the cross - lifeless. He the crucified Messiah the one close to the Father's heart. On that day at that very moment in time our image of an immutable and transcendent God was transformed. Superimposed on this was an image seared with humanity's suffering, humanity's travails, and the groaning of all creation. (Romans 8.22) Suffering is real. And the new thing of which Isaiah speaks that God brings about is costly.

I end with words formed against the backdrop of the Shoah. On a cellar wall in Cologne, Germany where Jewish people hid from the Nazis sentences were discovered: "I believe in the sun, even when it is not shining. I believe in love, even when I don't feel it. I believe in God, even when he is silent."* For such faith we give thanks! Grant us Lord such faith now and always. **Amen.**

Ich glaube an die Sonne, auch wenn sie nicht scheint.
Ich glaube an die Liebe, auch wenn ich sie nicht fühle.
Ich glaube an Gott, auch wenn er schweigt. Ich glaube, ich glaube!

- *In Jossel Rakover, Wendung zu Gott, Zvi Kolitz*