

Sermon for 11.00am service.
Sunday 22nd March 2015
Holy Communion at St. Stephen's
Passion Sunday.

John Beauchamp

Readings:
Hebrews 5:5-10
John 12:20-33.

Sermon:

Over the next two weeks we will follow the story of the events that lie at the very heart of our Christian faith. As we come to Palm Sunday next week, then on into Holy week with Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, and then on to Easter Sunday, we enter again into the central story and the central experience of all that our Christian faith is about. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord.

One of our problems as we do this though is that we look back at these events. We look back through the lens of Easter at the events of Holy Week and Good Friday. We look back knowing that Jesus did rise from the dead. We look back at all that surrounded Jesus's crucifixion knowing that this is going to be a story with a happy ending. A story that doesn't end with the darkness of a sealed tomb but continues in the brightness of an early morning garden as Mary hears the once dead Jesus call her name once again.

We know all that. But somehow, if we are really going to appreciate the depth of this morning's Gospel reading, we have to put all of this to one side. We have to enter with Jesus and his disciples into the uncertainty, into the fear and the dread that they are all feeling as events begin to unfold around them.

Jesus and his disciples are in Jerusalem. Palm Sunday has already happened. Jesus has entered Jerusalem riding a donkey and the crowds have proclaimed him as king and messiah. The city is filled with a sense of excitement and anticipation. Not only are there thousands of pilgrims squashed into its narrow streets to celebrate the Passover, but there is also this amazing man amongst them, a man with the most amazing charisma. A man who people flock to see and hear. A man who really with just one word could whip this crowd up into a revolutionary frenzy and light the blue touch paper of rebellion against the Romans.

Jesus at this point holds in his hands all that he needs to become a popular leader. He holds in his hands all that he needs in order to claim an earthly throne with its incumbent power and authority and status. He holds all of this in his hands, and yet also he holds in his heart his father's calling on his life. His Father's calling to become not a ruler but a servant. His Father's calling not to control a crowd but to submit to a crowd. His Father's calling not to earthly adulation but to earthly derision and hatred. And the thing we have to remember about Jesus as we join him at this point in time, is that these were real choices that he had to make. The choice between grabbing onto the earthly power and status that could have been his at the flick of his little finger, or submitting to the will of his father by setting out on the final part of the road to the cross, the road to unspeakable suffering and pain, the road to

crucifixion and death. A path that at this moment in time comes with no guarantees, but requires the greatest of faith. Faith that the promise of resurrection will become the reality of resurrection in the fullness of time.

And so, in the middle of the hustle and bustle of the crowd, some Greeks approach Philip and ask if they can see Jesus. And through the disciples the message eventually reaches Jesus himself. And as you read this passage you get the real impression that this prompts for Jesus a moment of decision. A moment at which his two options suddenly come together and he has to make his choice once again, just as he has made a choice at several points in his life before.

Jesus says: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."

The hour has come. Jesus says.

Now there has been much speculation by scholars as to why these Greeks provoke such a response from Jesus. Why does this tell him that the hour has come? Some think it is because these Greeks are in fact political activists themselves, revolutionary leaders looking to pick a fight with the Romans. They could be mercenary soldiers willing to pledge their allegiance to Jesus as a revolutionary leader. But whoever or whatever these Greeks are, you get a real sense here that Jesus once again finds himself having to make a choice. The choice between the way of the world and the way of his father. The blue touch paper is just an arm's length away. He has the match in his hand. Striking it would be the easiest thing in the world, and then all the comfort and joy of human acclaim would be his. And yet.. and yet... once again his decision is to throw the match on the floor and submit to the will of his Father.

No! says Jesus, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.

Maybe this is the moment, as Jesus rejects the path of rebellion and revolution and sets out firmly on the path to the cross, maybe this is the moment when Judas Iscariot makes his decision to betray Jesus.

Back at the beginning of the Gospel stories we read of how Jesus was driven into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. It would be easy to think that, having seen the devil off with the power of God's Word, Jesus was then left alone, but this is of course far from the truth. Jesus, as Hebrews 4 tells us, was tempted in every way, and this can leave us in no doubt that he was also tempted at every turn. And the temptation was really always the same, to go the way of the world, or to go the way of his Father. To seek human acclaim, or to seek his Father's acclaim.

In John we read of several occasions when the crowd had a mind to take Jesus and make him king by force. Each time Jesus has to reject the human acclaim and rededicate himself to the will of his Father. And here in John twelve we see Jesus faced with this choice once again. The choice encapsulated in his words:

"Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!"

and of course God's response as we heard is one of joy and confirmation at Jesus choice as his voice rings out, saying:

I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.

Or in other words, his Father says to Jesus: through the choice you have made I will be glorified. Because you have chosen my way, my name will be glorified in all the earth.

But the important thing in all of this is to remember that this is a choice. Jesus has made a choice, and he has chosen the cross. He has chosen the betrayal, the trial, the mocking, the beating, the humiliation, the jeering and baying crowd. And he has chosen crucifixion, the cruellest of deaths ever devised by the cruel and sadistic mind of man. And he is choosing all this, not through the rose tinted spectacles of the Easter experience. No, as Jesus looks forward to his suffering and death he does so with hope and faith, but not with certainty. Yes, of course Jesus had the promise of his Father. His promise that the Son of Man would be killed and on the third day raised to life. But although Jesus entered into the experience of death 'believing' and 'hoping' that resurrection would be the outcome, he could not have entered into it 'knowing' that resurrection would be the outcome. No, if Jesus death was really to mean all that it does mean then he had to enter fully into the emptiness of death, fully into the despair of death, fully into the loneliness of death and fully into the darkness of Death. And if this was to be so, then he had to give himself up to death completely, knowing that just as resurrection was a possibility, so eternal death was also a possibility. Otherwise his suffering would not have been real suffering, his despair and anguish would not have been real despair and anguish, and his pain would not have been real pain. And I think that there is no doubt that Jesus cry from the cross: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!' tells us that this was real, all too real and painful. A real separation from his father as the tide of death sweeps over the crucified Jesus.

The reading from Hebrews says:

"During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission."

Jesus submitted, he gave up everything, and he chose to do so. And he chose to do so because?..... Well simply because of you. Because of his love for the broken and fallen and dying world of which you are a part. Jesus became the kernel of wheat that had to die in order that you could become the seed that grows up to eternal life.

But at this moment, as Jesus says: 'The hour has come,' the only certainty is the certainty of death. Resurrection is a distant hope, but death is a very present experience. And that I think sheds for us a whole new light on our following of Jesus on his journey to the cross.

In a very real way, there is a sense that as Jesus was laid in the tomb his body was more dead than anything or anyone else had ever been before. And that is because, before this, Jesus was more alive than anything or anyone had ever been before. Total death, total darkness, total despair, total separation from his father. Nothing could have been worse. Nothing could have been more final than this. Here there is no Easter hope, no glimpse of what is to come, no light at the end of the tunnel. Nothing!

And that is the experience that Jesus chose to enter into. The experience he chose to enter into for you.

Today is called Passion Sunday. It's a Sunday on which we are called to reflect on Jesus passion. To reflect on his journey, not to resurrection, but to death. A journey that he chose to take. Chose to take because of both his obedience to his father's will and his passionate devotion and love for humankind. His love for us, for you and for me.

As a verse of the song we will sing in a few moments says:

Behold the man upon a cross,
My sin upon His shoulders;
Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice
Call out among the scoffers.
It was my sin that held Him there
Until it was accomplished;
His dying breath has brought me life,
I know that it is finished.

It is important that somehow, if we are really going to appreciate something of the reality of this story, something of the depth of all that Jesus has done for us, it is important that we somehow lay aside the certainty of resurrection that we now know. As Jesus faced his death he had no certainty. Yes he had faith and hope, but no certainty. And yet in his passion, in his passionate love for you, he still chose to die, he still chose the way of the cross, he still chose to carry your burdens, he still chose to give you freedom, even though all he knew was that this would crush him and destroy him.

As Isaiah said some four hundred years before:

"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."

Our healing, our freedom is only possible through Jesus suffering and death. So let us rejoice that Jesus chose the way of the cross, let us rejoice that Jesus chose the way of his Father. Let us rejoice that Jesus chose to endure the punishment that has brought us peace. And let us rejoice that by his wounds, through his shed blood and nail torn flesh, we are healed and we are made whole.

Let us pray.

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

We thank you Father, in Jesus name. Amen.