

## St Andrew's URC

### Passion Sunday 2019

This Sunday marks the beginning of Passiontide in the Church's year, a period of two weeks leading to Easter when our focus is on the journey which Jesus makes, for the last time, with his disciples, to Jerusalem. It will be a hard time, opposition to the teachings and challenges of Jesus is growing, not so much from the Roman occupiers but from the leaders of the Jewish faith, from the chief priests, elders and scribes, from Pharisees and Sadducees and Herodians. Why was this? Well Palm Sunday and the Cleansing of the Temple will say it all. In Jesus's eyes, the Jewish Temple authorities had so colluded with the pagan empire of Rome that they had made a mockery of the Jewish faith, of the centrality of worshipping the one true God.

In his three years of speaking about the kingdom of God, Jesus had cut to the chase of what it means to love God and to love neighbour as oneself. As the prophets before him, Jesus, in his parables and teachings, had in effect distinguished between good and bad religion. Bad religion was when a system of rules and regulations, feasts and sacrifices had become more important than doing the work of God, of healing the sick, of lifting up the poor, of giving release to captives. The good Samaritan was closer to God than the pious priest who passed by on the other side. The forgiving father embracing the penitent and prodigal son showed the love of God more clearly than the self-righteous older brother. This was good religion, showing mercy, kissing the leper, healing the centurion's son.

But challenging the establishment – be it religious or political- in any day will bring its furious opposition by those who have much to lose: the privileged, the corrupt, the self-seeking.

And so Jesus faces his Passion, his trial, his torture, his execution. And where will his disciples be in all of this? Can they also show the courage to be faithful to the God of the Torah? It would seem not, for as we approach the events of the last week of Jesus life we see betrayal and denial and desertion.

Today's gospel tells a story of the anointing of Jesus by Mary, Martha's sister, when she pours expensive perfume over the feet of Jesus. Judas Iscariot was outraged, claiming dishonestly, that he would have sold the perfume and given it to the poor. In our Lent group we have just read this story in Mark's gospel, although in that version it is an unnamed woman and Jesus is in the house of Simon the Leper. But in both accounts the message to the reader, to the listener is the same and it is profound and it is about our discipleship.

The earliest gospel, Mark, is sharper over this point than John. For Mark first of all describes how the chief priests and scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus. Then Mark tells the story of the anointing of Jesus and immediately follows it up with Judas agreeing to betray Jesus, thus meeting the needs of the high priest. The two stories jostle with each other in the text. They present us with two examples of discipleship – one is loving, fervent, all embracing – the woman anoints Jesus. The

contrast is with the failure and utter weakness of discipleship and the ultimate sin of betrayal.

Mark and John are writing their gospels at a time when the young Christian communities are facing hostility and danger from both Rome and the Jewish communities, who refused to see that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah. The gospels are there to encourage those fledgling churches in the face of persecution. But two thousand years later what can we take from the story of Jesus' Passion and our discipleship?

Well lets first take the word passion, not this time with a capital P, referring to these two weeks leading to Easter but rather with a small p, referring to the passions of Jesus or turn this around to a question: what was Jesus passionate about?

And the answer is there in the gospels. Jesus was passionate about justice, about a kingdom of love and righteousness. He was passionate about bringing in a world of peace and harmony between peoples of different backgrounds. His kingdom was a Kingdom of Nobodies. His table companions were considered at times to be unclean. Judas may have betrayed Jesus because Judas was disappointed that Jesus did not lead an armed rebellion, was not that kind of freedom fighter.

If we are to be true disciples of Jesus in our world today it is not difficult to see what we too should be passionate about. We too should be unafraid to challenge established organisations, religious or political, if they deny the kingdom of God. Last week there was one such example of how being a follower of Jesus can lead to passionate anger against the establishment. On May 3<sup>rd</sup> in Westminster Abbey there is to be a "National Service of Thanksgiving to mark 50 years of the Continuous at Sea Deterrent (CASD)". There is at least one Trident submarine at sea at any one time, with each carrying sufficient nuclear warheads to bring about catastrophic damage to many cities and impact the climate in a way which would affect the entire world. The decision to host this service in Westminster Abbey is surely contrary to the motion passed by the Church of England General Synod in July 2018. That motion says that "*nuclear weapons, through their indiscriminate and destructive potential, present a distinct category of weaponry that requires Christians to work tirelessly for their elimination across the world.*"

Here is one example of how being a disciple of Jesus calls on each one of us to ask whether we are with Mary and want to anoint our Lord, in other words to give him the honour which is due or to betray our Lord, as did Judas. Is giving thanks for Trident nuclear submarines anointing or betraying? I leave it to you to decide.

Following Jesus has never been easy nor is the invitation to take up our own crosses. It may be easy to wear a cross around our neck, more difficult to be passionate in the cause of right. As Jesus said, which is easier to say "your sins are forgiven" or "take up your bed and walk". In other words do we as Christians simply talk the talk (or sing the hymns) or walk the walk, even if that walk can lead to ridicule, hostility or danger?

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