

LENT 5

Apparently, a non-churchgoer recently picked up a church and community magazine promoting that today was 'Passion Sunday' and remarked to her friend that it was happening at the Church down the road and that all were welcome. She thought it was all about speed-dating!

Well, I am sure that some romances have begun in lots of different church communities, but today's focus is really on the last days of Christ on earth and interestingly, as in today's Gospel, it centres around a meal and around close friends, including Judas; there was passion certainly, displayed by Martha of Bethany in particular. Jesus never shied away from what she was doing or indeed the meaning of her actions. He did not say 'Do not touch me' as he was reported to say after his Resurrection; he didn't say accusingly, 'that's a bit too high Church for my liking'! No, the symbolism was much more important than any words and Mary's actions even more so. She trusted her Lord completely and yes, passionately so. Love and passion are all caught up with the knowledge of suffering, the reality and truth of the suffering that lay ahead.

I have heard some very painful personal stories just last week in which news of urgent medical treatment is needed for people or parishioners I know, and where the outcomes of that treatment look bleak...I feel sure all of us have been or still are 'haunted' in some way by that devastating news, the kind that seems to hit us so very hard. And that 'problem of suffering' is never easily explained away; perhaps Mary got that, took all that information within her very soul, which is why she wanted to anoint Jesus; it was a shock for your average dinner-party but for Mary, it was an intimate and sacramental moment and something to do in 'the now' rather than put it off. Jesus firmly

rebukes Judas for talking about tariffs or cheating the poor:
“You will always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

I suggest that this is why we keep a Holy Week every year and do not pass by on the other side; the three great days (and yes, Easter Eve is the first and most moving celebration of Easter) require all our attentiveness even if understandably, we sometimes feel anxious or uncertain or sad about the different ‘mood’ of different moments from the Garden of Gethsemane to the Upper Room and the hard road leading to Calvary.

In today’s Radio 4 special Sunday service they marked the 80th Anniversary of the execution of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (just weeks before the end of the 2nd World War). That great actor Tom Hanks read his passionate poem ‘Who Am I?’ which reflects those last desperate days of self-doubt, even despair. I can only quote a little:

“Am I then really all that which other men tell of?

... and ready to say farewell to it all?”

It ends: “They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.

Whoever I am, thou knowest, I am thine.”

There is always something to learn from Passiontide and Holy Week – not least about our own emotions, or ambivalence – and always plenty to reflect upon and pray for in our own daily lives, as well as for the many needs of our fragile and volatile world. But in all our thinking, believing and praying we do belong to the same Christ whose own Passion, Sacrifice and Death still leads us on to “win the laughter of thine Easter day”, as Peter Abelard prayed so beautifully, all those centuries ago.
AMEN.

The poem **Who Am I?** was written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Tegel Prison shortly before he was executed.

Who am I? They often tell me
I would step from my cell's confinement
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
like a country squire from his country house.

Who am I? They often tell me
I would talk to my warders
freely and friendly and clearly,
as though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me
I would bear the days of misfortune
equably, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I know of myself,
restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
struggling for breath,
as though hands were compressing my throat,
yearning for colours, for flowers,
for the voices of birds,
thirsting for words of kindness, for neighbourliness,
trembling with anger at despotisms and petty humiliation,
tossing in expectation of great events,
powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making;
faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?

Who am I? This or the other?

Am I one person today, and tomorrow another?

Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?

Or is something within me still like a beaten army,
fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who am I?

They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.

Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.

