

Sermon preached by the Very Reverend Keith Jones

Sunday 18 March 2018 – Passion Sunday (year B)

Lectionary texts: Jeremiah 31.31-34; Hebrews 5.5-10; John 12.20-33

*We believe it was **for us** he hung and suffered there.*

These days I will cross a road to walk under a ladder. Black cats crossing my path, solitary magpies, spilt salt – I behold them nearly unthreatened. Almost all the guilty cupboard of superstition my Welsh ancestors bestowed on me I have more or less exorcised. For am I not Christ's? If God is for me, who can be against me? His perfect love casts out my fears. I stamp on my temptations with an arrow prayer.

That's the story I tell, anyway. My backslidings I will keep to myself. I have put away childish things, along with the rituals of exorcism with which long ago I confronted a day darkened by the approach of double maths.

And yet the memory of living in fear that the ultimate powers of the world were against me remains dangerously undead. The world hides terror and fear behind its familiar facades. And here at Passiontide, the images of disaster, of suffering, of pain and betrayal and death sum up deep fears for our vulnerable lives. We see our worst terrors falling on him, and know such horrors could so easily fall on us.

The suffering and death of the Lord Jesus raises questions about whether God is so kind and loving after all. That God is really for us, and truly desires our good is something human beings in general find hard to believe. Deep in our psyche, even the psyche of convinced believers in the God of Jesus Christ, is the suspicion that God might not be perfectly well disposed towards us. Obscurely we can remain haunted by the suspicion that he might "have it in for us". I can remember as a choirboy a ruction in our church when a new rector appeared who dared to revise the prayer list of the sick which was read out in church each week. This venerable document was rarely edited, and had grown very long. But the husband of a chronically ill woman was deeply indignant. He had come to believe that all that was keeping her from death was this weekly recitation of her name. Leave out her name and God would take the opportunity of letting her illness get worse. The row at the church door impressed me strongly. Here was a senior member of the congregation who clearly doubted whether God was benign. He sounded petty and mean, awaiting his moment like an enemy.

Since then I've met a number of people in whose mind there has been a real possibility that God is even worse: a vengeful monster. Waiting to catch you out. They don't say so much, of course, because God is everywhere and would hear and take advantage of us. Better to suppress such unacceptable thoughts. But I even hear these unavowed anxieties when people in a prayer group ask God for favours, saying "O Lord, you can do anything: I really, really, would just pray that all goes well with the sale of my house" : as if God, like a touchy benefactor, had to be flattered and impressed by the intensity of our faith. Of course this kind of praying is actually condemned by Jesus himself.

And when it comes to Passiontide, there is room for this fantasy of God to have full rein. I once heard a popular preacher tell a horrific story to illustrate the Gospel. A coach driver saved his passengers on a steep hill when the brakes had failed. He skilfully steered the vehicle through a gate into a field at the side of the road rather than plunge over a precipice. The people on the coach were saved. Too bad that the coach driver thereby ran over his son who was standing in the way. This story, told very dramatically and at length, caused a suitable sensation and perhaps still does the rounds. I was by now rocking with horrified mirth at this travesty of our teaching, and wanted badly to shout out

“Who was running this infamous company which didn’t service its coaches properly?”

Hearing and considering the suffering of Christ helps us to deal with these profound, atavistic and destructive fears. For the suffering of Jesus on the cross is not caused by the Father’s malice. It is caused by the accumulated wrongdoing, folly and anger of humanity, going back and back. It is true that God allowed that process to work itself out on Jesus, as God allows the world to be a dangerous place. The Passion of Jesus shows God refusing short cuts. Rather, God deals with that injustice by letting that weight be laid on Jesus just as it is laid on you and me; as it is laid on all of us who bear the cross of our age and our world: think of it laid on people in East Goutta, in Yemen, in Miami; yes, and also on two people on a bench in Salisbury, and in its own way on you in your town, and in your home. In addition to life’s many dangers, the vast iniquity of humanity falls on us all.

But the Gospel is not that God presides complacently over this horror, saying “You deserve it”. Nor is it that God is like a psychopathic headmaster who would angrily flog the whole school except that one innocent victim agrees to let him exhaust his blood lust by walloping him instead (another hideous fantasy of deluded theologians). Of course not, though I sometimes sing hymns where that fantasy is not sufficiently kept at a distance. The hymns of Stuart Townend (we shall sing one shortly) are a case in point: how, when we get to it, will you interpret the last line? (Don’t look now!

Sometimes our fears and fantasies have suggested a notion that God himself requires counselling. But that is false news, The Gospel is rather that God, in unbroken union with Jesus Christ, has joined us in the darkness and alienation of the world. His suffering on Calvary is our human suffering now: and there and now God transforms it. He allows it no dominion over Christ. He will allow it no Lordship over your soul and mine. Passiontide will again show us the love of God in even the darkest of places and times. We are not going to be spared suffering or death. But God does save us from fantasies of a demonic God. God redeems us from fearing that we live beyond his reach even in the darkest hours. He has crossed the gap to us, his arms stretched out for us. When we go through these things, we go in the company of Christ. “Lord, Lord” he cries as he goes to the very edge of alienation from the heavenly father. “Lord, Lord” we cry to him, and speak his name. He goes to the very extremity of the human condition, leaving nothing unexplored and disregarded. The love of God goes right through Hell. Confront then your hidden fear that God will heartlessly condemn you or trick you. Speak of it in your dark hours to the Christ who is with you now and can be trusted. Triumph over your fantasies that God is not good and true, for God is for you. Walk under the ladders of the world with confidence.

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Ipswich March 2018
for St Edmundsbury Cathedral**