

**Sunday 20 October 2024**  
**The Twenty First Sunday After Trinity**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Isaiah 53.4-12**

**NT: Hebrews 5.1-10**

**Gp: Mark 10.35-45**

Our first two readings point to the central conviction of the Christian faith, namely that the crucifixion of Christ is of seismic universal and meritorious significance. In Isaiah we read of the Suffering Servant: 'He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities'. In the letter to the Hebrews: 'Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered'. Then, we have the request of James and John, the sons of Zebedee in the gospel story today, a story that has the effect of the post-Freudian suspiciousness of the twentieth century; it points to the different types of ambiguity around our understanding of Christ and his death: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you". What do we really remember and celebrate when we point to the Crucifixion? Because the cross has often been used as a weapon: We identify our suffering with Christ's suffering, and so we think of ourselves as more important than anyone else. We don't even compare our suffering with that of others.

You see that kind of approach even in the sort of language used by those killed in current conflicts in the Middle East for instance. A martyr according to the language of Hamas in Palestine is turned into a not-so-subtle kind of aggression whilst using spiritually ambitious language (which in fact the early Church noted about martyrdom too and warned against). On the other hand, the image of Christ's suffering patiently endured 'by a perversion of Justice' as Isaiah puts it, can also produce guilt: 'I did this, and yet he loves me' we might say. Or 'Jesus faced injustice but did not complain; then I must do the same'. What does it do to our souls to be faced with this each week here on Sunday when we look at the Cross so visibly dominating this Church building. We might become insensitive to it, not bothering with what it actually refers to, which is not good for us. Or we may become like the sons of Zebedee and the pseudo martyrs of our world today, finding satisfaction in suffering bodies and claiming advantage against others. In either way, we would have missed the real point of renewal that Christ's death brings about.

There is of course a difference between talking about suffering and facing death. Images of suffering terror and pain, all too evident in the fabric of our own world today bring in us muddled feelings as I have described earlier: either guilt, or resignation, or used for political advantage. We tend to develop strategies to manage our feelings. However, when we talk about death, we are talking about something other than this. Often, Icons of the Cross in Eastern Orthodoxy (like the one we have at the Altar here) show Jesus dead rather than suffering, an image of absence and ending, the breaking of a life and a world. And when we celebrate and remember the Crucifixion of Christ, we are more importantly facing death,

rather than an intense suffering. The redemption we celebrate is not simply accomplished by the fact that Jesus did or did not suffer more awfully than anyone else. How could we maintain such a claim in the light of the constant nightmares of the last century and the current images coming out of Gaza and elsewhere. Our redemption is achieved by his death. Why?

Here we have God's embodiment in a human life, promising to welcome the lost and to renew our humanity; and here are the systems of human meaning and power, religious, social, national and political cooperating to destroy him. When we remember the execution of Jesus by the Romans in first century Palestine (which no one can deny is an historical event in itself), we are facing that duality of human power that appears hostile to hope or meaning, and divine hope and meaning exposed as completely vulnerable to human power. There is the death we face: the death of our system; our systems appear empty and God is helpless. That is the death of whatever image we had of God or the world, and we find ourselves in the dark. Some of the great Christian saints (who we call mystics today), such as John of the Cross speak of that dark night of the soul (which is ultimately a distinctive Christian language) where he describes how Jesus achieved more in the silence of his death than in the whole of his ministry. As we face the deadly collision of God's truth and the world's reality around us, both of which are represented in the dead body of our incarnate God, all we can do is silence! But for us, this silence is the beginning of a renewal of the world. This is the darkness in which God is beyond our imagining, and the world descending into the chaos of creation, meets God for a new creation. Our silence, our acceptance of death makes room for the word that recreates the world. If we replace this with the dangerous world of suffering that we began with, the silence goes away.

But the letter to the Hebrews assures us today that "Christ learned obedience through what he suffered and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him". We know about the promise that we have in Christ because of the reality of Jesus' Resurrection. The new life that God has brought into being out of the worst of human injustice is not an instant triumphant conclusion to history but a fresh commitment to work in the light of the promise and renewal we have glimpsed confident that what we do has meaning because it is at one with the purposes of God. Hence Jesus challenges us in today's gospel reading: 'You know that among the gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you: instead, whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wish to be first among you must be slave of all'.

King Lear noted after he lost everything: 'poverty makes us ask the difficult question, what it means to be truly human'. And often the powerful in the world have neglected to ask that question, and they are less human for it. And if we are to think about the current tragedies of suffering in the Middle East, we will need to think about our work once this is all over, when all those who have been doing the undramatic but necessary work behind the scenes

unnoticed to bring healing and sustenance to those affected, ought to be honoured and acknowledged. Will we go to square one? or have we faced enough shared struggle and loss to make us really change things?

It is important in the light of this reflection to remember that our faith does not tell us that if we work hard things are bound to get better very soon! And we can put all serious problems behind us for good. What it does say is that what we ought to do due to human beings made in God's image is not in vain. It is upheld by and absorbed into the eternal purpose of God who uses all that we can offer him for the spread of human healing and the honouring of human dignity. We come to receive at this altar the one who did not come to be served but to serve and give his life a ransom for many. The Resurrection of Christ tells us that all we do for our fellow human beings is not lost since God's eternal purpose is healing and life. We can then stand firm. Our victory is not a once and for all triumph of human effort; it is the recognition that at the root of all things, all our acts lie a healing compassion that can never be extinguished. Thanks be to God for that victory.

**Fr Yazid Said**