

Sunday 6 April 2025
Choral Evensong on the Fifth Sunday of Lent

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: 2 Chronicles 35. 1-6.10-16

Gp: Luke 22.1-13

Passion Sunday, “Passion”—which is derived via the Latin *passio* from the verb *patior* (*pati, passus sum*), to suffer, endure, resign. Passion Sunday invites us to turn our thoughts to the suffering and the crucifixion of our Lord. It is a sudden change of gear in Lent; we begin today to get caught up in the events leading to Jesus’ arrest and trial and death. It is the day on which we begin to look towards and walk towards the Cross.

There are no shortcuts to Easter. We can reach the empty tomb only by way of the nightmare events of Passiontide, of Jesus’ last journey to Jerusalem to meet his destiny, of the entry into the city on that first Palm Sunday, of the Last Supper, the agony in the garden, the betrayal by Peter, the farce of a trial, the taunts of the crowd, the mocking and the scourging of the soldiers, the painful carrying of the cross to Calvary, the excruciating pain of crucifixion.

Today we begin the preparations for that journey to the foot of the cross and it is with that sense of preparation that our Lectionary readings describe the preparations for the celebration of the Passover, preparations in sharp contrast with each other.

The reading for this evening, from 2 Chronicles 35:1-6 and 10-16, describes a celebration of Passover that was so significant that one had to go back before the time of David and Solomon to find a keeping of Passover that was so well organized and joyfully conducted. This Passover was remarkable for several reasons.

It was remarkable in the magnitude of its celebration, including even the remnant of the north came to celebrate it in Jerusalem. “‘All Judah and Israel’ includes people from north and south, implying a larger attendance than at Hezekiah’s Passover (cf. 2 Chronicles 30:25. It was remarkable in its strict obedience to the Law of Moses: “No, not Hezekiah; for at his passover the congregation was not so great, nor so well prepared; nor were the Levites and singers so well marshaled, nor the sacrifices so many.” (Trapp)

Contrast the preparation for Josiah’s Passover with the preparations described in Luke, this was to be the final Passover meal and yet it was to take place in an upper room of an ordinary house. In chapter 22 Luke, to emphasise the importance of the Passover Celebration uses the word six times within 15 verses.

All Jewish males over the age of twelve were required to go to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival, followed by the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread. The Passover remains to this day a special celebration for all Jews, Jesus was in control of events as they approached Jerusalem, he gave the disciples detailed instructions of where and how the Passover was to be celebrated. So that there could be no mistake, they would see a man carrying a water jar, in itself unusual for this was women's work; the man was to be followed to the room and the owner of the house was to be approached. Jesus knew the room would be ready for them to use.

And so, we can see history being repeated. The Israelites were led to freedom from Egypt by Moses. God told Moses to give detailed instructions to his people, to kill a sacrificial lamb and use the blood to mark the door frames so that the angel of death would pass over the homes of the Israelites. Those whose doors were not so marked would lose their first born male child, and so it came to pass, and Pharaoh let the Israelites leave Egypt and travel through the desert to the promised land. Years later and we are seeing the build up towards the Easter story of Jesus, the sacrificial lamb, being killed to ensure our freedom.

In the upper room, at the Last Supper, Jesus shared with his disciples the Passover celebration, creating a new celebration, that of the Eucharistic supper, taking bread and wine from Jesus to share in an act of remembrance. That moment of receiving the Holy Sacrament remains the most intimate meeting point between God and us. There is nothing God will not forgive if we hold out our hands to him, ready to receive his gift of grace.

The religious leaders' preparation for the Passover was spent in trying to put Jesus to death because of their fear of him in Judas they found their solution. Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus with a kiss, in a garden which Jesus used to visit regularly, a peaceful garden where Jesus could find some peace and tranquillity in order to spend time with God. Could Judas have chosen a more sacred place than that haven of peace in which to betray his friend.

Do we feel hatred towards those who wish us harm? Then we should turn to our perfect example and learn from Jesus seeing how he dealt with those who hated and feared him. They put him on trial, on trumped up charges, and finally they crucified him, an innocent man. Jesus hung on the cross, between two criminals and so he was still associating with sinners, even in death, and he forgave those who persecuted him out of fear and ignorance of what they were doing.

We see here a connection with today's psalm, Psalm 35, a prayer to God for help against those who try to inflict injury for no reason. When our enemies are unjust and lie about us even when we do good to them, we can appeal to God who is always just.

Jesus showed us how to deal with adversity. The more we feel oppressed or downtrodden, the greater is our need for Jesus to show us the way of righteousness. As we acknowledge that need and turn to him, holding out our hands and placing them in his, in trust, so our way will become clearer.

On Passion Sunday we take a deep breath before the events of Holy Week unfold. We see how God is not far-off, detached and remote from the heartbreak of the world, heedless of our suffering and our pain. On Passion Sunday we begin to understand that God is utterly involved in the mystery and the immensity of human suffering, and how by offering himself in love for us he identifies with that suffering and redeems it.

But in the end, Passion Sunday is not God's final word about these things, and nor is Good Friday. In two weeks' time we will be celebrating Easter, Christ's victory over suffering, his triumph over death, his opening-up the way of resurrection and new life for us. But the point is that forgiveness and resurrection and new life are not more things to be acquired, more escapes from harsh reality. They are about being fully alive, about becoming what God always wanted us to be, about being the sons and the daughters of God. They are about empowering us to really care about the suffering of others, and to be passionate in our opposition to all the abuse and cruelty and exploitation and injustice which human beings inflict upon one another and the whole created order.

And all of this is God's free gift to us. Free to us, that is, but not to God. They cost him everything. They cost him the Cross. And we receive these gifts when at last we put everything else aside, and come empty-handed, just as we are, to kneel at the foot of the Cross. For only by way of the Cross will we discover the joy of the empty tomb.

Fr Bill Addy