

Sunday 29 March 2026
Palm Sunday

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Isaiah 50:4-9a
NT: Philippians 2:5-11
Gp: Matthew's Passion

There is something very powerful about dramatizing the passion story. It is no longer something we just read. It becomes an event we take part in. We follow Jesus into Jerusalem. We give voice to the characters: the fearful, the faithless, the angry, the weak. It's an opportunity for the Rector to hand out appropriate parts. I, of course, was cast as Judas. So many of these scenes are etched upon our collective memory. They show us how popular acclaim can turn into the cruelty of the mob. They show us the emptiness of human power, and the bitterness of a friend's betrayal.

The words of Isaiah come to life for us:

'I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting'

This is a story that moves us, more than any abstract idea, more than any teaching or creed. *This* is what it means for Jesus to empty himself of his divine status and submit to evil and death.

Like any drama, there are costume changes. But here, they have a darker meaning. Jesus is stripped and clothed in purple, crowned with thorns so that he can be mocked as a false king. He is dressed in his own clothes to carry the cross, only to be stripped once more as he is crucified. As Jesus hangs there, the soldiers cast lots for his garments.

These changes track how Jesus is seen by others. When he enters Jerusalem, people spread their own cloaks on the ground before him: a welcome given to a king. On his arrest, that kingly status is inverted. In the purple robe, the helpless and tortured man becomes a mockery of royal power. Finally, on the cross, Jesus is simply a human body. Unshielded, uncovered. He is naked under the sun and the glare of those who taunt him.

It calls to mind an episode from the recent film, *The Zone of Interest*. This depicts the domestic life of the commander of Auschwitz concentration camp. Over a high wall, unseen horrors are visited upon helpless bodies. A machine of extermination is in constant motion. Within the house and garden, there are flowers, playing children, a middle class dream of country living. In one scene, we see the commander's wife distributing clothes to servants and then looking at herself in the mirror as she tries on a fur coat. These are the garments of Jewish women murdered in the camp next door.

The film is powerful for its awful ordinariness. We only catch glimpses of the camp, but we hear the trains, the furnaces, the shouts and screams, as the Nazi family lives its idyllic life and wears the stolen clothes of the dead.

Contrast this with the way the Jewish Law commands creditors not to keep a coat taken as security on a loan: they must return it to its owner before sunset. Not even the destitute should be left naked and exposed to the elements.

It is this nakedness that is so shocking in the crucifixion. Not just physical nakedness, but the way Jesus is stripped of everything. Clothing, friends, dignity - even, it seems, his God. 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' It looks like utter defeat. Might wins the day. Fear wins the day. Shame wins the day.

And yet, the prophet Isaiah writes:

'I know that I shall not be put to shame;
he who vindicates me is near.
It is the Lord God who helps me;
 who will declare me guilty?
All of them will wear out like a garment;
 the moth will eat them up.

Jesus is naked, but not ashamed, like Adam and Eve before they allowed greed and guilt to rule them. Jesus is naked: and in his nakedness he reveals a naked God. A God who is only love, but a love that persists no matter what the cost. A love that outlasts all our heartlessness.

Jesus has taught us to let go of our possessions, our defences. Place your treasure, he teaches us, where neither rust nor moth consume. Now, Jesus reveals the depth of God's love for us, but also the glory of what God desires for us. God delights in us: not in the things we cover ourselves with, but in our undefended hearts.

Jesus stands with all who are subjected to cruelty, torture, war, mockery. He stands with all who bear shame and humiliation at the hands of the powerful. He stands with us: even when we betray him and refuse love. Like the moth, he eats up our pride and wears out our defences.

After the Maundy Thursday service, that wonderful celebration of the Last Supper, this church will be stripped of its decorations. It will remain bare through Good Friday and Holy Saturday, until the explosion of light and joy that is the Easter Vigil. I urge you to follow Jesus into the emptiness, be stripped of all pretence. For only in the emptiness can we be filled with love.

Fr Steven Shakespeare