

## Home Retreat: 27<sup>th</sup> March, 2021

On this Saturday, as we launch into Holy Week, there is so much to pray about that I hardly know where to begin. However, tomorrow is Palm Sunday when we first remember and celebrate the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem and then read the account of Christ's Passion as given in the Gospel of Mark (this year).

For me, this entry into Jerusalem stands for two related ideas to meditate. The first is the rapid change of the crowds from welcoming Jesus as Messiah and Saviour, the authentic Son of David for whom the world had been waiting, and then changing to the vicious and unwarranted deserting of Jesus, first by his own chosen apostles and then by the crowds who howl out in the front of Pilate's palace, 'Crucify him, crucify him!'. What strikes me is the fickleness of the crowds, a fickleness which we only too often imitate, changing from our tender and heartfelt devotion in church to our more normal attitudes of suspicion, criticism and mistrust of other people from the moment we get outside the church door – our own constant acts of betrayal.

The second thought about this entry into Jerusalem comes from the incident towards which it is leading up, namely the cleansing of the Temple. As Jesus goes from the city gate into the Temple (a mere 100 metres) he sees the fruitless fig-tree, and when they come out of the Temple, there it is – withered, never to bear fruit any more. This is the symbol of the fruitlessness of the Temple worship, which had lost its meaning, a mere matter of buying and slaying sacrificial animals and doling out the tithes on produce which were due to the priests. Has our church-going become the same sort of spiritless action, or is it always a real encounter with the Lord, a valid expression of our devotion and commitment to God?

*The gate itself is a reminder of the failures and hostility of people throughout the ages. It is at present a magnificent piece of building, a part of the great walls of Suleiman the Magnificent, built by the Sultan Suleiman in the fifteenth century, no doubt partly to keep out the Christians at the end of the Crusades.*

After this reminder of the entry into Jerusalem we come to the Mass of Palm Sunday, whose readings are centred on the Passion Narrative according to Mark, the earliest gospel and in many ways the simplest and most straightforward, certainly the shortest. The narratives of Matthew and Luke are read on the Palm Sundays of the other years of the cycle, and the narrative according to John always on Good Friday. The Johannine account has a quite different emphasis, for it is the Hour of Jesus, his hour of triumph, his hour of exaltation, being lifted up to the Cross and at the same time to glory. To this moment the whole gospel has been tending. In this reflection I will mention it to contrast it with Mark's account.

Mark's account starts with the Last Supper, or indeed before the Last Supper, with the anointing at Bethany, where an unnamed woman anoints Jesus for his burial, a precious act of personal devotion to Jesus, in contradistinction to all the horrors that are to come. Then we come to the Last Supper itself. This is a fragmentary narrative. It seems to be a Passover supper 'when the Passover Lamb was offered', but there is no mention of the Lamb in the account itself. In Mark's account only two little

incidents are recounted. The first is the treachery of Judas, the second the institution of the Eucharist. In the first the remarkable thing is the way the traitor is identified. In this account we are not told his name, but only his treachery. There is no mention of Judas Iscariot himself; it is only that the traitor shares not only the supper but the very same dish, proffered to him by the Master himself. The purpose is to underline the treachery of the action, a betrayal of hospitality and a betrayal of personal friendship. The brazenness of the traitor is almost unbelievable, that, having already made his bargain with the Temple authorities the traitor should act out his special love, shared with Jesus by sharing his table and his very dish, and then slipping out to fetch the arresting party. In a modern world of rushed and partial meals, we have lost the full sense of this sharing as a sign of trust and love, dipping fingers into the same bowl of sauce, sharing the same plants and leaves. But again, we do it at the Eucharist and then betray by callously throwing aside our own commitment.

Lacking in Mark but present in John is the washing of the feet, perhaps the most vivid of all the sacramental signs preserved by the church. It is a sort of prequel to the act of service which is the self-offering of Jesus. The priest takes off any grand kind of vesture and puts on a servant's apron as a sure and definitive sign of humble service, a devastating signal that any pretension to dignity in the priesthood are misplaced. The priest's function is only to serve, as – in a normal year – the priest does on Maundy Thursday.

The second element in Mark's story of the Last Supper is the institution of the Eucharist, the bread and wine which Jesus pronounces to be his body and blood – the blood poured out for many – and here many does not have any exclusive overtone, such as 'many but not all' – it stresses that the number is huge and excludes no one. Will all people be saved? That is Jesus' will; no one is shut out; we can only shut ourselves out by deliberately turning away.

I next turn, all too briefly, to the agony in the garden. Here begins one of the phenomena most striking in the gospel accounts: the evangelists themselves seem unable to portray the full horror of the events, and tone them down. So in Mark the horror that gripped Jesus in his knowledge of what was to come is portrayed vividly: 'he began to be horror-struck and to be beside himself'; he not merely prostrated himself in prayer but he was stumbling – the tense of the very suggests repeated half-falls – he could not stand upright – and he felt the pressing need for the company and support of his disciples, who merely nodded off to sleep. The Letter to the Hebrews, in an alternative tradition of this prayer, speaks of tears and loud cries. In this world of anaesthetics and polite killing (even executions) we can have little notion of the horror of crucifixion. Jesus would have known it well, a death fitting only for slaves who had no personal privileges, no human rights at all. But through it all the obedience of Jesus to his Father's will shines firmly. In the same breath he pronounces his own horror and his determination to go through with it. Matthew softens this account, for Jesus does merely fall to the ground in prayer. Luke still more, for Jesus kneels for his earnest prayer and stands up again when he is ready.

John's picture is totally different. There is no cry of distress, no prayer. Jesus holds his full dignity, for this is his Hour, the Hour which at the marriage-feast at Cana had not yet come, the Hour of his Glorification. So when the arresting-party comes he calmly asks them whom they seek, and replies 'I am he'. In the Greek this formula is not mere self-identification. It is the formula used by the Voice to Moses at the Burning Bush. Twice in the controversies in the Temple Jesus has said 'I am he'  $\epsilon\gamma\omega \epsilon\iota\mu\iota$ , the sacred, unpronouncible name of God (so dear and so awesome that it could be spoken only once a year, and that by the high priest) and they took up stones to throw at him for blasphemy. As throughout the narrative in John, Jesus is in command, and they can arrest him only when he gives them permission.

We return to Mark for the hearing before the High Priest. The nub of this scene is that at last Jesus declares himself. Throughout the gospel of Mark he has hidden his personality. He told those whom he miraculously cured not to spread the news. He silenced the demons whom he cast out because they knew who he was. What Peter at last bursts out the he is the Messiah he earns only a rebuke. Even the Twelve cannot and will not accept the message of a suffering Messiah. But they cannot understand Jesus; each of the three great prophecies of the Passion is misunderstood – or it is even as though they had never heard it, as the sons of Zebedee continue their ambitious struggle for the best places in the Kingdom. Never does Jesus accept a title, not 'Messiah', not 'Son of David', let alone 'Son of God' - only the mysterious 'Son of Man', which can mean no more than 'human being'. Now at last after two unsuccessful attempts to incriminate him as threatening to destroy the Temple, the high priest challenges him with two titles, 'Messiah' and 'son of the Blessed One'. At last Jesus replies with a 'Yes' and adds a third – to the horror of all, 'the Son of Man, seated at the right hand of the Power and coming on the clouds of heaven'. With these two last clauses he claims firstly to be the Son of Man in the Book of Daniel who comes on the clouds of heaven to the One of Great Age and receives all power on earth. Secondly, and worse still, he is seated at the Right Hand of the Power, sharing the mobile throne of God, the revered chariot-throne described in Ezekiel. Quite rightly the high priest cries out in horror at this blasphemy and rends his clothes to purge himself of the sound. It is only when he is about to be crucified that Jesus will declare his full personality, and it is for this blasphemy that he is hustled off to Pilate. Before that, as Jesus declares himself, and is mocked as a prophet Peter denies him three times, and Jesus' prophecy of his failure is fulfilled.

For the scene before Pilate I turn to John's Good Friday account. It is a truly dreadful scene. John structures it so that there can be no mistake: Jesus is king and as king he is rejected by the Jewish authorities, who at the same time reject their own inheritance. In a carefully-structured scene of seven episodes Pilate questions Jesus about his kingship, declares him innocent and resolves to set him free. The soldiers dress Jesus up as king and mock him as king. Then Pilate brings him out to the chief priests and the crowd, still in the royal purple robe and crowned, sits Jesus on the judgment-seat and declares 'Here is your king'. They reply by shouting out 'We have no king but Caesar', thereby denying everything that is sacred about Judaism, for God is their only king – the psalms and the whole Bible are full of 'The Lord is king', 'Great is the king of Israel' – and now they shout out their loyalty to Caesar. Only Pilate remains firm, and despite their protests writes above the Cross 'Jesus the

Nazarene, King of the Jews'. The Jews deny their God and the gentile affirms the kingship of Jesus.

Finally I must say a brief word about the crucifixion itself. The torture itself is too terrible to describe. Even the bloodthirsty Romans shrink from telling us, but describe it as horrendous. We know little about it; the evangelists give it only one word, 'When they had crucified him...'. Conventionally Jesus' arms were stretched wide, but we do not even know this. They could have been above his head, so that he was suspended from his hands, naked, pinioned, and his feet nailed from the side. In Jerusalem has been found a severed foot with a massive nail through it from the side; though not Jesus' own foot, this could be the way it was done. The earliest representation of it, dated from the very early second century, a child's mockery-drawing, obviously a tease to a companion, shows a man with a donkey's head, crucified with his arms spread wide. Alternatively, it could be that the arms spread wide are symbolic of Jesus' all-embracing love.

We do not know for certain what were Jesus' last words – the evangelists differ. Mark gives us the opening of Psalm 21, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me'. This is not a cry of despair, but is the beginning of the psalm, which passes through suffering to triumph: 'All the earth shall remember and return to the Lord, and my soul shall live for him, my offspring serve him'. Luke has the dignified 'Into your hands I commit my spirit', therefore stressing Jesus' own willing action. I find John's conclusion more significant still: Jesus commits his mother to the Beloved Disciple and his Beloved Disciple to his mother. This BD is never named in the gospel, and I think this is significant and deliberate, for John wishes him (and it is masculine, 'Son, behold your mother') to remain anonymous. This BD occurs four times in the gospel of John, once at the Last Supper; once (now) at the foot of the Cross; once at the empty tomb, where he sees the significance of it, though Peter does not; finally (at the breakfast-party with the risen Christ on the lakeside) as guarantee of the tradition handed down. I think this is a sketch of the beloved disciple: he is beside Jesus at the Eucharist; he shares Christ' passion; he recognizes the significance of the empty tomb; he is the trident and guarantor of the tradition, What more is the BD to do? This is the foundation of the first Christian community, Mary and the BD together. It is only then that Jesus says, 'It is finished' or 'It is complete' (his life, his mission, the scripture, the will of his Father?). Then, perhaps the most significant of all, he gives over his spirit – or is it 'Spirit' with a capital?