

**Fifth Sunday of Lent,
Passion Sunday, 21st March 2021**



Dear Friends,

'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' (John 12: 21)

'Passion' is very much the word of the moment as we reach the Fifth Sunday of Lent, also known as *Passion Sunday*, which marks the beginning of an observation of Passiontide for Christians during the last two weeks of Lent, in which we reflect on the events which lead to Jesus' death. This will be our second Passion Sunday affected by Coronavirus, and marks the first anniversary of Lockdown on 23rd March 2020.



'Shine' by Mike Moyers

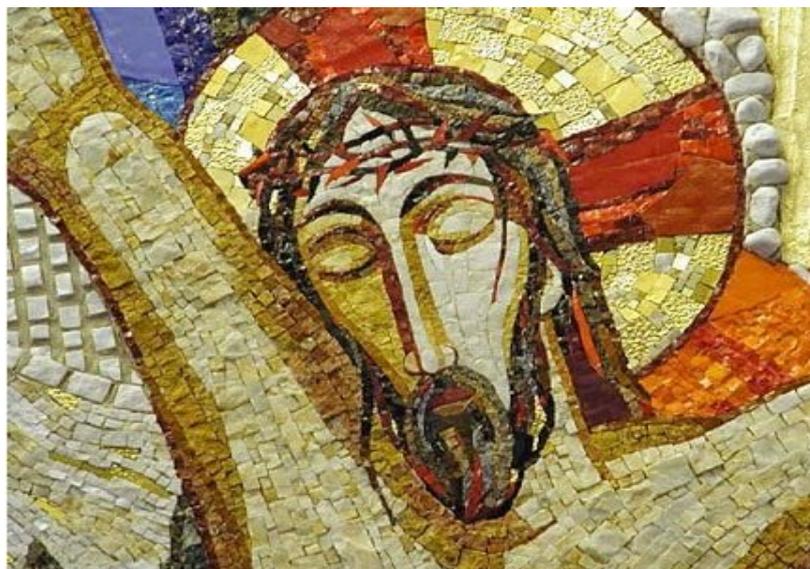
Next Tuesday, there will be a national reflection as we bring to mind all those who have lost their lives to Coronavirus across the globe. Since this date, millions of people have been bereaved, both as a result of Covid-19 and other causes. The restrictions we've all been living under mean that many people have had to grieve without friends and family around them. Marie Curie, a charity which supports people around the event of a terminal diagnosis, has organised a National Day of Reflection to acknowledge grief and loss over the last year. There will be a minute's silence at 12 noon and people are being encouraged to put lighted candles in their windows during that evening after dusk – responding in passion, remembering in love!

Passion was palpable in this week's Benefice Lent Course, based on Hannah Steele's excellent Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent book for 2021, *'Living His Story.'* In a lively video interview, theologian and evangelist, Rev Canon Yemi Adedeji encouraged us to pray with passion *'that God will open to us a door for the word, that we may declare the mystery of Christ'* as we seek to fuel the fire for evangelism. (Colossians 4:3) As one course member reflected, when we pray for encouragement to evangelise, so God opens the door of our own hearts to the opportunities the Holy Spirit gives us.

We also learned of an inspirational Ugandan pastor and pioneer of the Christian faith called Titus. Whilst visiting his home town of Kayunga, situated some 50 miles northeast of Kampala, Hannah Steele recounts how she and her family were encouraged to visit Titus' grave by the current pastor. As they brushed off orange dust from his headstone, the Steele family got an understanding of Titus' passion for the world to know Jesus, even after the dear evangelist's death. His epitaph read:

***I have fought the good fight, I have kept the faith.
I have finished the race.
HOW ABOUT YOU?***

I wonder how many of us could say we are as committed as Canon Yemi and Pastor Titus to helping people see Jesus? Be assured that the Holy Spirit certainly is! As we come to the anniversary of Coronavirus, we can see how the Holy Spirit is at work, even in the pit of a pandemic, using us in remarkable ways to help people see the Christ. Whilst we have come to know a year in which our communities have suffered the immeasurable loss of loved ones along with the closure of our churches, it has also been a time of opportunity - as people thirsting to find the living water which only Christ can give, have come to see Him for themselves through online encounters with the message of His Good News, and through the lived experience of meeting Jesus in and through the kindness of neighbours and strangers.



Details of a mosaic by Mark Rupnik

In our Passion Sunday reading from Chapter 12 of John's Gospel, we come to a great turning point in Jesus' earthly ministry. A week before Palm Sunday, it becomes clear that the hour of His passion has come. Earlier, Jesus had said He would lay down his life for sheep not of the fold, and so the significance of Greek Gentiles arriving at the great Jewish Spring festival of Passover asking to see Jesus, indicates that things were hotting up. The sheep not of the fold are lining up to enter into the fold through Him!

John's Gospel speaks of Jesus' glory in returning to the Father through death, resurrection, and exaltation. On His pathway to glorification lies the cross. John allows us to glimpse it just up ahead. So, what was Jesus' passion? What did he wrestle over in prayer?



'King of Kings' by Mark Jennings

Truthfully, the answer isn't immediately clear! Jesus ignores the question of meeting the Greek visitors, and instead chooses to speak of His own death. As St Augustine describes this text:

Jesus himself was the grain that had to die, and be multiplied; to suffer death through the unbelief of the Jews, and to be multiplied in the faith of many nations.

This is a beautiful picture of the sacrifice of Jesus. Unless a kernel of wheat is planted in the soil, it will not grow to produce many more seeds. Jesus had to die to pay the penalty for our sin, but also to show His power over death.

The Greeks wouldn't just 'see' Jesus as they had asked. Through Jesus' resurrection, they would be drawn to Him by the powerful love of God that looks death in the face and defeats it by meeting it voluntarily, not just for Israel, but for the whole world. Through John's Gospel then, we begin to glimpse an understanding that Jesus isn't only talking about himself. He is pioneering a route along which we are all called to follow.

Jesus knew only too well how His crucifixion lay ahead, and because He was also human, he dreaded it. We hear Him praying: *'Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say, "Father, save me from this hour?" No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.'*

Reflecting on this prayer, Martin Luther once said of Jesus, *'No one ever feared death as much as this man.'* Jesus, troubled and human, wanted to be spared from the agony He had to face. He knew that it was *through* His agony that God's glory would shine out to the world. Jesus knew that God had sent him into the world *expressly for this purpose* – to die for our sins in our place! Part of the passion we celebrate today is that Jesus said *'NO!'* to His human desires in order to obey and glorify His Father.



'Christ with Arms Raised' by Georges Rouault

It was agony for Jesus to do the will of his Father; to bring Him glory. It was agony for Jesus to drive out the 'prince of this world.' And it was agony for Jesus to draw all mankind to himself. But there was no other way. The whole point of His passion is that Jesus was not saved *from* the hour. He was saved *for* it!

In verse 32, we hear Jesus say: '*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.*' Clearly, Jesus was making a decision that would change the course of history for eternity. The hour of His destiny and of his death would be like a flash of lightning, suddenly illuminating the whole cosmos with God's love.

As we shall see next week on Palm Sunday, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was not in anticipation of being *crowned*, but of being *crucified*. It was the example of His supreme courage, knowing He was going, willingly, voluntarily, sacrificially to His death on our behalf - as our ransom; as our substitute.

So, what was the Passion of Jesus? You! YOU are the passion of Jesus. And me. All of us! And even if you were the only person in the whole world He would still have died for you. This Passiontide, please hear the truth that despite the *huge* cost to that dear and passionate man, Jesus would rather go to hell for you than go to heaven without you. This is the Jesus for whom Pastor Titus spent his own earthly passion - not only evangelising for his own eternity, but to ensure security in paradise for all who wish to see Jesus.

Yours, in the passion of Christ,

Jax

Rector, The Downs Benefice



How wonderful to know that Prince Philip has been reunited with Her Majesty at Windsor Castle following his successful heart operation at St Bart's Hospital. Our love and prayers are with them, and with their wider family. May they each know the peace, wisdom and the saving passion of Christ for them all.

Schedule of Services

Our churches are currently closed for in-person services in order to model the Government's request of us all to stay at home and beat the spread of Coronavirus. However, we are hoping to be able to relax these restrictions over Easter. Please see below for a schedule of services to Easter Day. Some are online video services and others are in-person. You will need to book your seats for these church services by contacting our Benefice Office on (01962) 880845 or by email at: office@downsbenefice.org.uk

The videos for Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday will be uploaded onto our Benefice website, which also has many links to a wide range of digital resources from across the Church of England and within our Diocese at: <http://downsbenefice.org/> Did you watch our wonderful **Mothering Sunday** video, which has received rave reviews? It's not too late to view it on our website.

DAY	DATE	SERVICE	CH	CR	LI	SP	WH
Palm Sunday	28 th March	No In-Church Services – There will be a short, recorded Liturgy of the Palms Service on our website					
Maundy Thursday	1 st April	No In-Church Services – There will be a Holy Communion Video Service on our website					
Good Friday	2 nd April	Easter Garden with Time of Reflection		10am			
Good Friday	2 nd April	Time of Reflection	2pm				
Easter Sunday	4 th April	Easter Communion			9.30am		
Easter Sunday	4 th April	Easter Family Service		10am			
Easter Sunday	4 th April	Easter Family Service				10am	
Easter Sunday	4 th April	Easter Communion	11am				
Easter Sunday	4 th April	Easter Family Service					10am



Collect Prayer for the Fifth Sunday of Lent

Most merciful God,
who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ,
delivered and saved the world:
grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross
we may triumph in the power of his victory;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.



John 12: 20-33 – Jesus Speaks About His Death

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus.’ Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say, “Father, save me from this hour?” No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.’ Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’ The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, ‘An angel has spoken to him.’ Jesus answered, ‘This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’

He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.