

GOOD FRIDAY 2017 Yr A

St David's Devotional Service

John 18.1-27

What do we need to sustain our lives, to give us purpose and bring us happiness and fulfilment? I suggested last night that there are three things offered to us in the events of these holy days we are contemplating and they are love, faith and hope. Maundy Thursday speaks to us of Jesus' love – he is the one who loves us to the uttermost.

Today we're going to reflect on the faith he showed as he faced his greatest test, a faith we need to sustain us in the trials and tribulations of our own lives.

So we go with Jesus first from the Upper Room of the meal and down the hill into the Kidron Valley below the walls of the city and cross over into the olive groves on the other side. It is night, but perhaps illumined by the full Passover moon.

The scene is differently portrayed from the one the other evangelists give us. There is no agony in the garden in John's account. For him that has actually happened already as Jesus steels himself to come to Jerusalem and face what he knows deep down will await him there.

He's not impassive in the face of death – this is the man who weeps at death and, in John's words, 'was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved' as he confronts the tomb of his friend Lazarus.

And again after the triumphal entry Jesus talks of grains falling to the ground and dying, adding, 'Now is my soul 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.'

For John this moment is rather the beginning of the unwinding of the consequences of that other garden at the very beginning of God's creation where God comes in the evening light seeking Adam. Here it is reversed. Sinful humanity comes now seeking to do away with the one who is God.

They don't all know it – Judas has changed his mind and those who come with him are simply doing a job apparently. Or is this also a picture of how every human being searches unconsciously for an encounter with God but how through blindness or prejudice end up destroying the one who would save them?

Jesus reveals his identity for those willing to see, then as now. 'Who are you looking for?' he asks, 'Jesus of Nazareth', they reply. 'I am he', says Jesus. It sounds formal to us that answer, we'd say more naturally, 'That's me.' But in that answer lies Jesus' identity as God. In Greek, simply *ἐγώ εἰμι* I am. This is the divine name and John has used it throughout his gospel to indicate Jesus' divine nature – 'I am the bread of life', 'I am the Good Shepherd', 'I am the light of the world', 'I am the resurrection and the life'.

John will contrast this in just a few verses with Peter's reply to those who question his identity – 'You're one of them, aren't you?' 'οὐκ εἰμι' 'I am not.' Here in a nutshell is our denial of who we truly are – made by God, loved by God called by God and sharing his nature. I am not – and indeed, without Jesus, without God, he speaks the awful truth. For him it will bring tears of repentance which save him. For the other betrayer, Judas, he chooses indeed not to be any longer.

Here, then is love portrayed and love betrayed. Here we watch Jesus, calm now in the face of his destiny, putting his faith in the Father with whom he is one and whose love draws him to this place of confrontation with human sinfulness.

As love contrasts with betrayal so faith shines like the moonlight in the darkness of human denial in the garden.

In moments of decision where do we put our trust? Which way do we go in a crisis? Will we have faith in the Father like Jesus? Or slip all too easily into the bitterness and anger of Judas or the fear and cowardice of Peter? What is my true identity? Who am I?

So we pray for ourselves and for all throughout the world, especially other Christians, who face times of trial.

From resignation and despair, from cynicism and sarcasm,
Good Lord, deliver us.

From violence in the night, from false arrest,
Good Lord, deliver us.

From starvation and propaganda,
Good Lord, deliver us.

From pride of intellect, from arrogance of mind,
Good Lord, deliver us.

Grant that we do not give you a kiss like Judas,
But confess your love like the thief,
Grant this, O Lord.

Grant that we may enter with the sinner in the new age,
Grant this, O Lord.

GOOD FRIDAY 2017 (2)

John 19.8-25a

The trial before Pilate is on a knife-edge at this point: he seems to be about to release Jesus. The difference between Jesus' calm looking Pilate in the eye and Pilate's agitation, shifting from one place to another, weighing his options, only serves to highlight the gulf between them.

Pilate doesn't realise he's the one being judged at this moment; he thinks the power lies with him when in fact Jesus is the one who stands freely before him, sure of his identity as beloved Son of God and precious in his sight. He knows why he is there and what he has to do. Pilate, though, doesn't. Pilate's essentially pragmatic and cynical view of life means he lacks a guiding principle of any depth and so is easily blown in one direction or another depending on where his political nous tells him his best interests lie.

It's the difference between the man of faith and the man who lacks any; the contrast between the man of God and the man of the world; it's the difference between the man who is truth and the one who can't be bothered even to address the question.

It's the difference between someone who knows his place in the world and why he is there and the one who gives no thought to it and so has nowhere to turn to and nothing to guide him when the crisis, the judgment, comes.

We must be careful, though, in reading this not to make the mistake of thinking all rulers or politicians are unprincipled or cynical like Pilate. There is also a cost to leadership – and the passion story illustrates that all too well. And a moment's thought will make us realise that, especially in these days of social media and internet trolls, being genuinely a public servant out of a real concern for others, like Jo Cox the MP murdered only a short while ago, is not, as they say, a walk in the park.

We also need to remember that we all hold authority or power of some sort over others, it's not just politicians - whether because of our role in society or because of our place in life as a parent, say, or a carer, an influential friend or a trusted confidant perhaps; the possibilities are endless. For rulers such things are writ large, for most of us how we cope in a crisis and how we exercise whatever power we have may be played out on a smaller scale but it also has consequences for others. So the question of where we put our trust is not academic but real for all of us.

The final test for us, though, will be how we face the prospect of our own death. What will sustain us then? How will our faith have prepared us for it? For Jesus his life and his death are all of a piece, like the seamless robe that John alone tells us he wore. He is indeed God's anointed one, the King of the Jews. Pilate and the Jewish leaders think the charge pinned above him on the cross is a sneer, an ironic insult. Instead it is the truth they cannot see, that is the true irony. Here is the true king, the real High Priest if they did but realise.

Faith, the Hebrew letter tells us, is 'the conviction of things not seen'. That, of course, is the difficulty of it. To see, to know for sure is not faith but knowledge, it is certainty. In all the gospel accounts Jesus is not immune from this either. In each one, in its own way, his inner struggles are revealed. He would not be truly human if he felt no doubt. But it's because he is truly human that these events we are remembering today matter. He is the one who trusts the one he calls Father – it is in fact the desire to do his Father's will that pins him to the cross. Because he is himself a man of faith in the Father, a faith that is ultimately vindicated, we can have faith in him.

O God, mindful of the presence of your Son
standing before his accusers
yet maintaining absolute integrity;
we ask that, in thought and in deed,
in speech and in silence,
at work or at leisure,
in public and in private,
our lives also may embody
the perfect consistency of his life and death;
to his glory. Amen.