

Passion Sunday ...

... The people of Holy Week

A sermon given on Passion Sunday, the Fifth Sunday of Lent, 26th March 2023 – by Revd Canon Peter Wadsworth, in Beverley Minster

Romans 8:6–11; John 11:1–45

As we approach another Holy Week and Easter, I'd like to reflect for a moment on some of the key figures that we shall be meeting in the next two weeks, and then to relate them to this great story of the raising of Lazarus. One of the surprising things about the Holy Week story is that there are actually no really great villains. Now, you might say, 'But surely, you know, the murder, the execution of the Son of God, surely there must be great villains.' But no: there's no Hitler; there's no Stalin; no Putin. What you have are frail human beings who are uncomfortably like us.

Take Caiaphas for instance, a leading figure in getting Jesus arrested and tried. Now, at one level, he was a powerful man, the head of the Jewish religion, the high priest of the temple, but in many ways, he was actually a very vulnerable man. He actually depended on the goodwill of the Romans. If any of you have ever been to Jerusalem or seen a map of the city of Jerusalem in Jesus's time, you will see that literally like a great fist punching into the Temple Mount was the Antonia Fortress, the Roman military headquarters. That was a very, very powerful symbol of Rome's power over the Jewish people. And in one particularly humiliating tradition was that when the great feast days came, particularly when Caiaphas would enter the Holy of Holies, the Romans actually held his ceremonial robes and he had to go and ask for them and then give them back at the end. Now, he made a judgement, a judgement which was catastrophically wrong. He made the judgement that it was right that one man should die rather than the whole nation be put at risk. He knew that rebellion would bring disaster. And in one level, he was absolutely right, because 30, 40 years later, the Jews did rebel - and what happened? They were defeated totally. Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. So he made that bad choice, a bad choice, which was also about, of course, protecting his own power and influence.

Then we have Pilate, the Roman governor, the only one who actually gets a mention by name - the only human being getting a mention by name in the Creed - and he, of course, is the Roman governor. But once again, we see a man who is weak rather than deeply evil - we get a sense that he would have liked to have let Jesus off (in fact he says that) but he

too is afraid for his position. If news gets back to Rome that he has let a rebel go and trouble has followed, well, that's the end of him. And of course, Judea was a tiny little province. He was probably hoping something better, greater, or maybe even to be called back to Rome to be one of the central figures around the emperor in Rome itself - a weak man who in this, we think, really knew what was right and what was wrong, but didn't have the moral courage to follow through and allowed self interest to take first place.

And then there's Herod. Now he's not the Herod, the wicked Herod of the Christmas story, although all the Herods were pretty dire lot, but he only plays a bit part anyway.

And then we have the mob crying out for Jesus to be crucified. Well, we all know what mobs can do. Look at what's happening in France at the moment. Individuals who would never dream of doing something on their own. Put them in a crowd, whip them up as they were and they will do virtually anything.

And we have the disciples, the disciples who commit themselves to Jesus above all Peter, who says, you know, whatever happens, I will not desert you. And of course they can't deliver on what they promise.

And finally there are the soldiers, brutal men but hardened by war and battle with very little interest in what's going on other than, as it were, getting through their service as best they could.

So if you like, Jesus dies on Good Friday, not through the massive wickedness of one person, but through the accumulative weakness of human beings to which we are all prone. I mean, we may not get involved with crowds but look at the way that social media can whip up a virtual crowd in our own time, when the media goes after one person. How often have we thought we really ought to speak up about something, but we felt we're afraid? Or it's not in our interests, or we hear people in places like health service or elsewhere in jobs who say, 'I really wanted to speak out, but I was afraid I'd lose my job if I did.' That's all too human.

So how do we cope? It would be much, much easier to face Holy Week if we could pin the blame on one 'mega villain' and then be able to say, 'And of course, I am not like that. Nothing.'

So how do we cope? Well, we cope by allowing the life of Christ, the resurrection life of Christ to be the guiding force of our lives. If we had had the first reading for today - it's Paul in Romans talking about the difference between living in the flesh and living in the spirit and he says, "You now live in the spirit." It's about allowing God to be the guiding force.

And it's not just a question of sort of moral decisions, rights and wrongs, rules and things like that - it's about somehow gradually learning to see other people as God sees them, to see the world as God sees it. And the more we allow ourselves to do that, the less likely we are to exploit people, to hurt people, to ignore people.

Jesus, when he comes to raise Lazarus, is giving a foretaste of a resurrection life which is of a different quality, a life which is full of joy and of peace. Some of you may read the novels of Graham Green. There's one called *The Power and the Glory*. It's set in the period when the church in Mexico about a century ago, was being very, very severely persecuted. And at the centre is this thoroughly unheroic priest. He drinks too much, he's a sort of whiskey priest, but nevertheless he becomes the hero that is escaping from his persecutors. There's a marvellous line in that novel which says, 'Hatred is just a failure of the imagination.' It's when we don't see other people as they truly are, we don't see people through God's eyes.

So as we enter into this Passiontide and then follow these key figures, then we see that Jesus dies because of human weakness, of sinfulness, yes, but not mega sinfulness.

And it's interesting (and men, take notice) that the only people who come out well out of that story are the women. The women who are there at the foot of the cross. And also, don't forget that little cameo part for Pilate's wife, the one who warns her husband not to have anything to do with this righteous man. And in them and in their devotion (and of course, St John as well, the one man who does get to the cross) we see the signs of God's life lived in them.

So we need to accept our weakness: that we do tend to look after our own interests; that we can be afraid of standing up for the right; we can be swept along by, if not the mob, literally, then at least public opinion. And when we accept that and acknowledge that in ourselves, then we are opening ourselves to allowing God's way of seeing people and God's way of seeing the world to be formed and manifested in our lives. And if we can take even the tiniest step during this coming Passiontide and Holy Week to letting that happen, then indeed we will be able, in a fortnight's time, to celebrate a joyful Easter.

Reading Text

John 11:1-45

¹ Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.

² Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³ So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' ⁴ But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' ⁵ Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶ after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷ Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' ⁸ The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?' ⁹ Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰ But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.' ¹¹ After saying this, he told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' ¹² The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' ¹³ Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵ For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' ¹⁶ Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.

¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' ²³ Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' ²⁴ Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' ²⁵ Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' ²⁷ She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

²⁸ When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' ²⁹ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place

where Martha had met him. ³¹ The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³² When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴ He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' ³⁵ Jesus began to weep. ³⁶ So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' ³⁷ But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹ Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' ⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' ⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

⁴⁵ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Romans 8.6-11

⁶ To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷ For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law-indeed it cannot, ⁸ and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. ⁹ But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹ If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.