

Sermon for Sunday 17 March 2024

Jeremiah 31: 31 – 34; Hebrews 5: 5 – 10; John 12: 20 – 33 Year B

Passion Sunday

I wonder, if you think about it at all, how you would define your life in terms of success or failure? What is most important to you? Financial security? Family? Feeling you have made your mark in some way in the world of work? Or might it be something creative – music or art or writing? Or knowing you have contributed significantly to the wellbeing of others in some particular way? As we go through life we all have to come to terms with our own journeys – the good times and the difficult ones, and the times when we just seemed to be treading water.

At the beginning of our Gospel passage today Jesus is at the height of his popularity. He really is a celebrity. He has just entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey, consciously acting out prophetic words from one of the Psalms and the

prophet Zechariah. He's entered the holy city as the King, the Messiah, the one promised to deliver God's people and bring in a new reign of justice and peace. He's done this just before the great festival of the Passover when Jews still celebrate their liberation from captivity in Egypt. Jesus' opponents, represented by the Pharisees, feel powerless against him. "Look, the world has gone after him," they say to one another (John 12: 19).

Right on cue, we meet some Greeks. They are not from God's people the Jews, but represent the whole world. The whole world now wants to see Jesus. And the whole world will see Jesus. But not quite in the way they expect.

Jesus recognises that this is significant. He knows that the time has now come for his passion and death to begin. But what he says is "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (John 12: 23). To see Jesus glorified is to see Him crucified. This is not "Death or glory" in other words perhaps death or victory – as in the famous regimental motto – but "Death and glory". For

Jesus, the glory and the victory is in the death itself. To see Jesus crucified is to see Him glorified. Or rather, to see God glorified. Significantly Jesus prays “Father, glorify your name”. He does not seek His own glory, but the Father’s.

Right throughout history God has been reaching out to human beings, seeking relationship with us, making covenant agreements with His people. And human beings have been consistently unable to keep those covenants and to live God’s way. Our reading today from the prophet Jeremiah spoke of God’s promise of yet another covenant – one that would be written on our hearts. A covenant of forgiveness.

Jesus’ perfect obedience to God the Father leads to His death on the Cross. On the Cross all the forces of evil are defeated, and the world is judged on whether or not it receives and believes in Jesus. In God’s terms none of us can make a success of our lives. We have all failed. But in Jesus God offers us a way back; a way of forgiveness and freedom. He does everything for

us, because we are unable to save ourselves. And that offer is made to everyone. As Jesus says, “And I, when I am lifted up, from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” (John 12: 32).

This is good news – the Good News!

God has done everything for us. We are forgiven and freed to live our lives for Him.

But that’s not quite the end of it. Jesus says some difficult things in our Gospel today. He talks about a grain of wheat falling into the ground and dying, but coming up again bearing much fruit. He says, “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

What does he mean? Well, partly he’s referring to his own death and resurrection. But he knows that to follow Him also means a kind of dying. A dying to selfishness in order to live a more fruitful life.

I don’t think that being a follower of Jesus means living a miserable life or not enjoying it. After all, we know that Jesus enjoyed life. He had friends

and went to parties! But Jesus is not a bit interested in success as we see it. What He cares about is faithfulness and obedience. This makes all the difference. So we can stop judging ourselves, comparing ourselves with others and learn to relax our grip on being in control. We can begin to develop an open-handed, generous approach to life. Not desperately holding on to the good things we have, but instead living generously. Being prepared to freely give our money, our time or our talents. Spending time with people we might not count as friends. Allowing God to direct our time whether day by day or in our longer-term planning - and sometimes being surprised by what happens. As Jesus said "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am there will my servant be also."

Who knows where we shall find ourselves?

I'm going to finish by reading again some verses from that wonderful hymn – When I survey the wondrous cross.

When I survey the wondrous Cross
On which the prince of glory died,

My richest gain I count but loss
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast
Save in the death of Christ my God;
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.

Amen

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