

Celebration of the Lord's Passion

(Isaiah 52:13 – 53: 12 / Hebrews 4:14-16, 5:7-9 / John 18:1- 19:42)

30.03.2018

Last Sunday we listened to Mark's Passion narrative. I suggested that we should allow ourselves to be disturbed by that account of Jesus' suffering and death – drawing attention to the fact that Mark's Passion ends on a very stark note indeed. Jesus' dying words in Mark's gospel account express a sentiment of total dereliction: *My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?* This is the cry of a disfigured, disgraced, humiliated man. The Christ of Mark's Passion account is the *Suffering Servant*; He is depicted as One totally diminished, cast low, reduced to a state of nothingness. Jesus dies as One abandoned; at the end of the day He is completely alone.

John's Passion story read on this Good Friday is quite a contrast to Mark's account.

While, in many respects, John gives us an equally dramatic account of Jesus' Passion – perhaps an even more dramatic account of the Passion than those of the Synoptic gospels – Jesus is presented to us in the Fourth Gospel as a far less tragic figure. Christ appears in John's gospel as One who is in spiritual control of the situation, even though all real control has been taken from Him. John's Christ of the Passion story comes across as the great *I am* of John's whole gospel account. Jesus' first words in the actual Passion narrative come after He has foretold and, in a way, prepared Himself and others for all that is going to happen to Him. When His pursuers come with their lanterns and torches to help them make their way through the darkness, which reflects their inner darkness, Jesus – whom John's gospel depicts as *the light of the world* – is waiting for them. In spiritual control of the situation, Jesus takes the initiative by asking the cohort who have come to arrest Him who it is that they are looking for. This is soon followed by Jesus' final *I am* declaration: *I am He*. Even – indeed, especially – in His Passion, Jesus appears as the great *I am*. If Isaiah's Suffering Servant Song is taken by Christian tradition to allude Jesus *no longer recognisable as a man because He looked so disfigured in His agony*, John does not shy away from presenting this as nothing other than Jesus' divine identity. With Jesus in control spiritually, the cohort may well arrest Him, but in the unfolding of the story Jesus will be shown to remain sovereignly free: God cannot be taken; He cannot be held captive. Where Mark has Jesus' last spoken words to be words of great humiliation, the last words John records Jesus speaking from the cross depict Him as having gloriously accomplished all that He was sent into this world to do. With majestic voice, the One whom the epistle to the Hebrews calls *the great hero of our faith*, can proclaim: *It is accomplished*. In contrast to the impression of Jesus given to us by Mark – the picture of Him as One cast low, reduced to nothing, diminished – John presents to us a Christ who is *lifted up, exalted*, already in His death *raised to great heights...* One whose dying is an act of fulfilment, completion and accomplishment.

Although the basic story line remains the same in all four gospels, the presentation/interpretation of events by John is quite different to the other three. John's account is solemn, majestic, regal even. *The Servant* of John's gospel is *the Servant King*. The Fourth gospel's Passion account is imbued with dignity; the way things are played out befit a king. There is nearly a *noblesse oblige* note to the story. Jesus' kingship is given ample space in the dialogue between Pilate and Himself. It culminates in Jesus' declaration: *I am a king. I was born for this*. Christ is shown to be the king who ransoms His people: the true Shepherd King who lays down His life for His flock.

Unlike the other Passion narratives, which depict Jesus stripped naked, exposed in His vulnerability, John's narrative has Him die robed in majesty. There is nothing in John's

account to say that Jesus' robes were removed. Christian artists have for this reason sometimes depicted Him reigning from the cross in majesty, robed in regal attire. In John's gospel the cross is revealed, at one and the same time, to be Jesus' *throne of glory* and our *saving remedy*, the *tree of life*, the *standard raised high* to which we look for healing.

The cross also appears in John's optic to be a rallying point for the nascent Church. The place Mary and John hold at the foot of the cross introduces a note of gentle humanity into what is otherwise a rather inhumane situation. The Crucified One is not entirely abandoned by the human race He came to save, nor does He entirely abandon humanity. In giving Mary to John and John to Mary, Jesus creates a new family whose hallmark will be care and consideration for each other, a commitment to live the grace of mutual support in genuine compassion. The family born on Calvary's Hill is not one of bloodline, but a family of the Spirit. Note here, once more, it is Jesus who takes the initiative: He gives His mother to the disciple He loved and He gives this disciple to His Mother. Just as Jesus gave Mary to John and John to Mary, so Christ continues to give us to each other in the Christian family. Is there not a call for us to see each other as Christ's gift? In John's Passion narrative the mystery of the Church is present. St Ignatius of Antioch reminds us in his writings of something we forget to our peril. I'm thinking of those of us who in times of suffering, pain and distress in Church life are perhaps inclined to forget that Christ and the Church simply cannot be separated one from the other. This early doctor of the Church states unequivocally in his Letter to the Smyrnaeans: *Wherever Christ is, there is the Catholic Church*. Ignatius' statement can also be read the other way round to say: *Wherever the Church is, there Christ is present*. It is in the immediate context of this statement – which links Christ and the Church, the Church and Christ – that Ignatius speaks with clarity of the specific ministry of the bishop within the Christian community. He draws to our attention that the bishop is the guarantor of the presence of Christ and the communion of the Church. Ignatius insists that to be in communion with the Church Universal we must be in communion with the Local Bishop. He is clear in what he says: *Wherever the bishop appears, there let people be*. Ignatius leaves no room for a 'pick and choose' approach. It is dangerous when we do! This reminder found in Ignatius' teaching – teaching which dates from the very earliest period of Church history – should reinforce for us the gravity of the present situation here in our Diocesan Church of Dromore, while what we see Jesus do for us from the cross, when He establishes us there as *a community of disciples*, should serve as a word which can console and comfort us at this challenging time. We see from Jesus' words to Mary and John that we are called, like them, to live in mutual respect, showing kind consideration in each other's regard, united as one family in love. The Lord has not abandoned us. He never will. Even when, looking at things from our perspective, all might seem to be lost, the Lord who sees to our every need will find a way to lead us through. The first thing He does to help us in this respect is to give us to each other. For us to dare to be there for each other – especially at this difficult time.

The blood and water which are said to have streamed from Christ's open side when the soldier pierced Him with a lance speak to us of the new birth which has come about for God's People through Christ's death on Calvary's Hill. This new life is constantly renewed for us. Not least among the ways whereby new life is renewed for us Christians is through our participation in the sacraments of the Church. As we approach the Church's sacraments – not least those of our baptism (a grace which will be renewed in our hearts this Easter Night in the great Paschal Vigil) and that of the Eucharist (the great sign of Christ's love for His disciples which the Church will celebrate until the end of time, remembering Christ's saving death and resurrection, while awaiting His return in glory) – let us dare to make our own this

plea formulated by the hymn-writer in a poetic turn of phrase: *Blood of my Saviour bathe me in Thy tide. Wash me in waters flowing from Thy side.*

It is good for us to recall that we need to be continually purified and reborn in and through our communion with Christ's saving death. There can be little doubt of the Church's need to be purified at this time when we cannot but feel sullied. The Church needs to be purified from those sins of the past which still haunt us and which continue to stain and taint the wounded body of Christ today. We need to be freed from and relieved of the weight of guilt which is hanging over us and clinging to us collectively as Church at this time. It would be foolish for any of us to think that only others – people long since dead – have brought disgrace upon the Church. In so many ways, we have all done that and continually do it – if in no other way than by our scandalous reactions to others' scandalous behaviours.

Right now, as Church – especially here in the Diocese of Dromore, but in many other places too – we cannot but feel weakened and in need of fresh vigour. The Body of Christ has been severely battered and is left badly bruised. In the pitiful state in which we find ourselves today – covered in shame and suffering pain – once again we might draw forth some solace from on High by making another of the hymn-writer's pleas our own. Looking to Christ *lifted up as Moses lifted up the Serpent of bronze in the desert* – in other words, daring to look straight on at and face up to what has poisoned our life as Church – we could and should cry out, from the depths of our distress and near despair, these words of confident trust: *Strength and protection may Thy passion be. Deep in Thy wounds, Lord, hide and shelter me.*

John's Passion story ends in an atmosphere of deep peace. I have no doubt that one of the things that brings everything to such a peaceful resolution in John's Passion narrative is the place Joseph Arimathea and Nicodemus are shown to have played in the story. With such a depth of humanity, with such an attitude of respect, and also bearing witness to the grace of the love of friendship – a central theme in John's gospel – these two men dare to come out from the near obscurity in which they have hitherto followed Jesus. They take such a great risk when they ask for Jesus' body to care for it and give it a decent, dignified burial. Their demand required of them very great courage. They would have won for themselves the scorn and even the wrath of Jesus' enemies – people of their own religious society – by daring to ask for Christ's remains. In normal circumstances Jesus' body would have been left to hang on the cross until it rotted, devouring birds of prey would have had their pickings, what remained of Jesus' mortal being would have been left to decay.

Instead Joseph accompanied by Nicodemus brought large quantities of costly ointments in order to ritually inter the body of the One whom they had finally come to acknowledge openly as their Lord and Saviour-King. Strengthened by Christ's Passion, they now felt they could be disciples without fear of being judged by anyone. Hitherto, these men had been secret disciples *out of fear of their own people*, now, at this stage, when nothing was to be gained, and indeed so much lost, these men dared to stand up and be counted.

So strong had their love for Jesus become through His sacred Passion that Joseph and Nicodemus now accepted to exclude themselves from participation in the great Passover feast, in order to tend to Christ's mortal remains. Having touched Jesus' dead body, they knew they would be deemed ritually unclean and unable to live the *Pascha* with their co-religionists. This is surely greatly significant. What it implies is that Joseph and Nicodemus are now openly Christian – in the optic of John's gospel, this also implies that they have become *friends* to each other, for John's vision of Church could be said to be that of *a society of friends*. What is more their gesture shows that now that they are Christians Joseph and Nicodemus are willing to forego participation in the paschal celebrations of their people. This

is because they have come to recognise Jesus Himself to be the Passover. For them, to be with Christ, to care for Him, is well and truly to live the *Pascha*.

In the same way, for us to care for others, to draw alongside the Crucified in their person, is to fulfil what Easter celebrates. Saying that, we cannot but think these days of the abused and the afflicted, men and woman and children still held in the pain and distress they have endured; we remember also their loved ones who are suffering with and for them and who are distressed in their sentiments of helplessness; we are also conscious of all those who have been maligned, cast aside and scapegoated; we are equally aware of those who have felt put under tremendous pressure – for some a pressure beyond their strength to cope with... We cannot but think of all the casualties in the fall-out of the present Diocese of Dromore crisis... people at every level of the Church... all who are suffering for whatever reason and in whatever way. To draw alongside any of these people – all of these people – is for us to really live, to truly fulfil, what our Paschal celebration should lead us incarnate: God's love which makes us ever ready to give our lives for our brothers and sisters.