

Passion Sunday (B)
(Isaiah 50:4-7 / Mark 14:1-15)
25.03.2018

The passion story which we have just read should profoundly disturb us. It is meant to do that. Mark's Passion should break us out of our complacencies, our false piety; it should shatter that most terrible sin of the supposedly impeccable: the illusion of self-righteousness. Let's face it, many of us foolishly entertain in our minds and hearts the belief that we are better than the next one; that we are more righteous than others; that we are incapable of doing what we have seen or heard of others doing. To fail to recognise that we are just as capable of doing the worst, as we are of doing the best, is to display very little honest self-knowledge. We must be careful when we lament with words such as: *How could anyone do such a thing? How could anyone have allowed that to happen?* Often we forget our own wrongdoings and betrayals. We fail to recognise how we can fail and betray others by our silences and/or our denials of ever having known them. It was here that Jesus' first disciples got it wrong and it is here that we His disciples today are still inclined to get it wrong.

When we ask how *anyone* could do something terrible perhaps what we need to hear is the word *anyone*. *Anyone, everyone* is capable of the best and of the worst.

I meant what I said when I stated that Mark's Passion story should disturb us. So, let's allow it to do just that. To help us in this respect, let's bring it a little closer to home.

I suggest that we allow our reading of today's gospel to shake us out of the false comfort of self-righteousness in which we are perhaps too readily inclined to take refuge when confronted with the evil to be found in fallen nature and our broken world.

It would be far too easy for us to read today's gospel narrative and feel compassion for the suffering Jesus of two thousand years ago, keeping Him at the safe distance of far-off Jerusalem. St Paul makes a valid point when he states that *Christ still lives His passion until the end of time*. Jesus lives His Passion today much nearer to us than we might like to admit or dare to imagine.

The ancient psalm with its lament, *My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?*, has been echoed by so many people throughout the ages. It is being echoed today by people right beside us, people known to us, people of our close entourage.

Let's dare to admit that some of us prefer to turn a deaf ear to other people's cries – ignoring the suffering Christ in them. Let's go further still and dare to own up to the fact that some of us do what many around the foot of the cross did: we mock and deride people we witness being publicly humiliated and shamed – in a certain sense crucified. All too often we join our voices to the clamour of the crowd: *Crucify Him! Crucify Him!* We mightn't use those exact words, but sometimes our words amount to little less than that. Maybe we don't say anything at all, of course. We can prefer to sing dumb, saying nothing to balance the bias being voiced by others against people scapegoated and left *hung out to dry*. To say or do nothing to redress injustice is to be unjust oneself.

The cry of dereliction which Jesus hollered upon the cross – a cry which rings out across the ages – cannot but pierce us to the heart if we actually have a *heart of flesh*.

Jesus is not the last one to have cried out: *My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?*

At difficult periods of their lives many will have prayed those words in anguish and pain – just as Jesus did. In difficult periods in our lives, we may have done so ourselves.

I said we'd bring today's gospel closer to home...

In our Diocesan Church of Dromore many have cried over the years in pain and dereliction, as Jesus did. Many are crying in this way right now. There are those whose names are known

to us as victims of the late Malachy Finnegan's abusive behaviours, others whose names we do not yet know and perhaps never will – people who have suffered and are still suffering silently because they were on the receiving end of abuse. (One of the terrible things the scourge of abuse does to people is to silence them, debilitate them and disempower them. Abuse paralyses the one on its receiving end.)

Then there are all those others who are suffering, even though they were not directly abused by Malachy Finnegan. I am thinking of the many who are grieving because they must feel so terribly betrayed – people such as Malachy Finnegan's surviving family members; the staff and students of St Colman's College (an educational establishment close to our community through its music department) – staff and students of the present as much as of the past; then there are all those people before whom Malachy Finnegan stood as Christ's representative when they received or celebrated the sacraments of the Church... There are also those who are trying to minister to God's People in our local Church today. Among the many who are suffering let's not forget the one who for some nineteen years served the People of God in this local Church as our bishop. He too is suffering greatly.

As well as all these whom I have just named – people near to us, we could say – there are so many others who never heard of Malachy Finnegan until his name appeared in media outlets in recent weeks: men, women and children, right across the world at this stage, who are feeling profoundly troubled, deeply disturbed and greatly shocked by all they've heard and are still hearing.

It is against this backdrop that we read Mark's disturbing account of Jesus' suffering and death.

Mark's Passion Narrative draws to our attention something which our human experience proves to be true: the fact that human beings do terrible things to each other. Even when they don't afflict harm directly, people can be vicariously responsible for others' suffering and pain by their failures to intervene as they could and should. There have been occasions when the Church has fallen into this trap. What the Malachy Finnegan story reveals – and so many other clerical abuse and Church silence stories reveal – is that among the human beings who get it terribly wrong are religious people. It was this way in Jesus' time and it is still so in ours. Those who sought to eliminate Jesus were the self-righteous and the religious people of the day. And then there were those others whose behaviour in the narrative should perhaps disturb us most, given that we would claim to be what they were – Christian disciples: I'm thinking of Jesus' closest companions and collaborators who either opted for a *just to say nothing* policy or, worse still, decided to join their voices to that of the crowd, driven by mass hysteria, who mocked and derided Jesus – shouting out along with those around them, in a bid to protect themselves: *Get rid of Him!* There were surely many among the crowd who cried out disparaging words against Jesus who thought that this was the right thing to do, without having all the facts, simply aligning themselves with those to whom they gave too much credence because they esteemed these people to be more intelligent or better informed than they were themselves. In our own day there are those who claim to give *power to the people* who simply manipulate others, acting as dictators, whipping up public opinion in the sense they want. We can all so easily get caught up in the cries of the madding crowd – if for no other reason than to feel accepted as part of the group. In this way *we* can get it terribly wrong. All so readily we can lose our ground. We can allow ourselves to become agitated and get carried away by the winds blowing all around us. The roaring surges of the sea-tossed waves, on the troubled waters in which we navigate, can engulf us and carry us away.

Standing here this morning, called to announce the gospel at this very challenging time for the life of the People of God in our local Church, I feel compelled to say that we would all do

well to come back to today's gospel story in a bid to situate ourselves properly and to hold our ground, *in Christ*.

At this time we must try to see things in their proper perspective.

Understand me. I am certainly not advocating denial.

Bishop John's parting message was clear and unequivocal. There was no denial in it around the painful reality which assails us. In his parting statement to the People, Religious and Clergy of the Diocese, Bishop John wrote: *I would ask you first and foremost to continue to hold in your prayers those who have been abused and all who are suffering*. There is no denial in that statement. Bishop John acknowledged that people have been abused and are suffering. For me – for all of us – the reading of this morning's Passion Narrative is about their pain – and the pain of every other person who is part of this tragic story. It should also be about all the suffering which exists on the face of this earth for whatever reason.

That being said, we must not lose sight of the fact that this morning's Passion Narrative is ultimately a gospel story: that's to say a good news story. The gospel is always rooted in life; it is for this reason that it never dodges pain, because pain simply cannot be dodged in real life. But, ultimately, Mark's Passion Narrative is about more than just pain. One thing I would like to stress as being of fundamental importance to us today is that the gospel message is about how to stay *truly human*, even when caught up in the most inhumane situations we could ever imagine. (When I say *stay truly human* I also mean *be really Christian*.) I believe that today's gospel carries within it a challenge for all of us to strive to be *truly human* – to be our *true self*, as we are meant to be, as a *child of God*. We must strive to stay *truly human*, be *really Christian*, when we see others (and sometimes find ourselves) held in the grasp of those who consider people's lives and dignity to be expendable, mere commodities to be used in an abusive, destructive way.

Unfortunately, in our fallen, broken world, human life is greatly undervalued – not to say, not esteemed at all.

I end as I began... repeating that today's gospel should disturb us. It should disturb us because it is about pain of the body, the heart, the mind and the soul.

Today's gospel should have us consider the excruciating pain many are suffering at this very hour for any and for all of the reasons I have enumerated in this morning's reflection – and for lots of other reasons besides.

We should not lose from sight that today's gospel is not only about the pain Jesus experienced in His last hours two thousand years ago; it is also about that which many men and women and children are experiencing today – right now!

May we have at heart to think especially of all those who feel alone in their distress at this very hour. May we strive to find ways of reaching out to those who feel abandoned by God when confronted the mockery and blasphemy of others – I'm thinking of those people into whose faces others cry telling them to call upon God to give them help... because they certainly won't be doing anything to alleviate their pain.

The call of the gospel is to be present to, there for, the Crucified Christ as He undergoes His Passion still today in all suffering brothers and sisters of our wounded human race.

Amen!