

Good Friday

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

10.04.2020

*It is accomplished*

As those final words spoken by Jesus in John's Narrative Passion resounded here in this church today, a line from Christ's prayer of preparation for His Passion came to mind. I thought of that verse from John 17 in which Jesus declared: *Father, I brought glory to You here on earth by doing everything You told me to do.* (John 17:14) By His life-giving death upon the cross, Jesus *accomplished everything here on earth that He was told to do*; He *brought glory to God* by revealing Him to our world for who and what He really is: compassionate merciful love!

When we hear the words *It is accomplished* we think in terms of the past tense. The phrase – sometimes rendered in English translations *It is finished* – is inclined to make us consider Christ's life's work and death as something over and done with. But, when Jesus says His work is accomplished, the word used in the original text, makes it clear that He was not only looking back, but, from where He was situated, He was also looking forward. Biblical scholars point out to us that the Greek verb used is in the perfect tense. That is most significant! The perfect tense speaks of an action which has been completed in the past, with results continuing into the present, while still looking to the future. Put simply, what Jesus accomplished for us on the cross still lives on for us today; and more than that, it also remains to be pursued. It now remains to be pursued by us! The call to share in the cross of Christ stands at the heart of radical discipleship. Our Christian vocation engages us to live the mystery of the cross in our lives!

When I said a moment ago that all that happened on Calvary is still in effect today, I was not just thinking of the result of Christ's life-giving death, which is our salvation. I was also thinking of the reality of Christ's Passion which is being shared by so many people right across our world... and just how much at the present time marked as it is by enormous suffering and so much death!

It seems only right to dwell for a moment on the reality of Christ's Passion which lives on in the world today, for, I am pretty sure, this is a big issue for many of us. How are we to understand what is happening in the world around us just now? What sense, if any, can we give to it?

What Paul called *the scandal of the cross* still shocks us two thousand years later, especially when we see it to be alive and active in present reality. We want to flee the cross. We want to deny it. We would certainly like to be able to downplay the call addressed to us to share in it. And yet, radical Christianity, by which I mean, Christian faith which is really rooted in the Gospel, bids us to identify with the suffering and pain of Jesus... and to identify with that suffering and pain when we see it endured by our brothers and sisters in humanity. That people (ourselves included) are led to participate in Christ's Passion can scandalise us. It can leave us feeling deeply distressed, profoundly troubled and badly shaken.

The Gospels show us that suffering and death – other people's suffering and death and His own – had a profound effect upon Jesus, so should it really surprise us that it has such a strong impact upon us?

I cannot help but think of what one former Archbishop of Canterbury once said when he stated that *our Western Christianity has become so afraid of the mystery of the cross today that all too often what we present to the world in this day and age is but a 'filleted' Christianity*. I suppose what he meant was a Christianity without flesh and bones.

These days, what the world needs is not *filleted Christianity*, but *flesh and bone Christianity!* Our world needs a Christianity that can identify with the dismay of people of flesh and bones.

Later on in the course of this liturgy we will be invited to venerate an icon of the cross of Jesus which depicts the Lord of life living His crucifixion: that most terrible of deaths! If you were able to look closely at the icon we will venerate here in the abbey, you would see that Jesus is portrayed to be nailed to the cross, but, His side is not yet pierced by the lance. This was the iconographer's way of expressing the mysterious truth that Christ still lives His Passion. Christ still lives His Passion today, just as He has done and will do in every age and generation until the end of time.

We cannot but think of how Christ still lives His Passion at this time in so many people who are suffering from Covid19. Likewise, Jesus is living His Passion in so many others who are suffering for different reasons and in a multitude of ways – often with their deep inner pain and turmoil invisible to those around them.

Paul states that *Christ suffers until the end of the world*. This thought might shock us at first, but it can also comfort and strengthen us. It can even confirm our faltering faith. What the apostle affirms means that however alone a suffering person may feel themselves to be, the Lord is with them. Christ suffers in them. Suffering people may even consider themselves to be *Atheist* – literally, *without God* – but the Lord of compassion is with them. Indeed, God is within them... just as He was with and in Jesus who cried out in His seeming God-forsakenness: *My God, My God, why have You abandoned me?*

Be assured that when the monks of this abbey stand or kneel before the icon of the cross later on in this celebration, we will not only be presenting ourselves before the *Throne of God's grace*, but also all of you who join with us for this liturgy via the webcam link... along with so many others who are united with us in prayer without internet connection. Taking a moment to humbly venerate the wood of the cross upon which our Saviour died, we will carry upon our hearts, in a genuine prayer of compassion, all those people whose suffering is immense today... all those whose suffering is further compounded by the fact that they are obliged to live in isolation. I think it is true to say that suffering always makes people feel alone, but the present distancing measures that are being held in place will be making some people feel their solitude all the more acutely.

Might I suggest that wherever you are – uniting yourself to us in spirit – that each one of you dare not only to *look to the One who was lifted up for us all*, but, in doing so, that you also *incline the ear of your heart to listen and to hear* what He has to say to you from the cross? Listen to Jesus whisper into your heart that ultimate phrase He uttered at Golgotha. *It is accomplished!* Christ wants that those words resonate deep within us when we are led to traverse Calvary situations in our own lives, or find ourselves pained to have to stand by helplessly as we witness others experience crucifixion in theirs.

*It is accomplished!* Understood properly, those words offer us comforting assurance and great encouragement. Speaking them, Jesus died to life in this world, not defeated and exhausted, but sure and certain that *He had done what He was sent to do*. He knew that He had revealed, and that He would continue to reveal, God's love to us from the cross. Jesus does that for us

today. From the cross, Christ manifests to us that our God is *a God who is with us when we suffer*.

While our suffering can make us all feel terribly exposed, profoundly vulnerable, painfully abandoned, and even completely desolate, it is important to realise that Christ who suffered for us also suffers with us – within us. He stoops down from the cross to hold us in His embrace; to assure us that we are not alone.

Finally, Christ's last words *It is finished* should not to be heard in terms of *I am finished!* To the contrary! With Christ's saving death all begins anew! The cross appears in John's Gospel as the new *Tree of Life*.

Interestingly, there is a strand of Christian tradition that holds the place of Christ's death and resurrection be none other than that corner of Eden where Adam was fashioned from the clay of the earth and afforded the gift of life when God breathed His own breath into him.

We are told that after Jesus died *a soldier came along and pierced Him with a lance and immediately blood and water streamed from His opened side*. The eternal well-spring of God's love was liberated and unleashed for us at that moment. Ever since then, God's grace has flowed freely upon our world. We have been and are continually being bathed in an immense tide of Divine grace which will never cease to flow in our direction. By our Baptism we have been immersed in Christ; we have been given a share in His own life.

It is important for us to remember that not only did Christ offer Himself *for* us on Calvary, He also gave Himself *to* us... and He continues to do so. Christ offers us a share in His life each and every day. But even that is not all. He wants to give Himself to others in and through us. Each one of us is called to be a living witness to Christ's passionate self-giving love for all humanity. We are called to give our lives for others and to them, just as Jesus gave His life.

While Christ's work was *completed* on Calvary, His crucifixion was not an end to His Passion, rather it was the inauguration of His passionate love being made manifest in and through His disciples who would imitate His self-giving love.

Today, Jesus invites you and me to pursue the good work He perfected on the cross of Calvary.

St Paul dares to speak of the call addressed to us in terms of our *completing what is lacking in the Christ's Passion*. That little line must be properly understood. What it is saying is that we have for mission to continue to manifest the Lord's love to others. We are called by our whole way of being to show others that God's love revealed on Calvary is eternal.

The psalmist captures the idea of the Lord's love being pursued in those who belong to Him in a little line which crowns a beautiful prayer of thanksgiving, when he prays: *Your love, O Lord, is eternal, discard not, but rather complete, the work of Your hands*. (Psalm 137)

We could paraphrase and expand that verse in this way. *Finish what You started God. Finish Your saving work of love in and through us. At this time when so many walk through the thick of trouble and distress; at this time when we need Your saving help more than ever, reveal Your love to us and help us to manifest it to others in our turn!*