

**Sermon preached by the Rt Rev'd Tim Stevens
at St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Passion Sunday
Sunday 7 April 2019**

*"For whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss
because of Christ." Phil 3. 7*

I have found in these last few days that I cannot get a piece of advice out of my head. It comes from the great Swiss theologian Karl Barth: ***"Preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other"***. This I believe is always the task of the preacher and at a time like this especially so.

How can we follow the Passion of Christ in the coming two weeks without asking what it means for our tortured nation?

How can we watch crowds baying for Jesus' head in the Gospel narrative without being reminded of the anger and suppressed violence of the demonstrations in Parliament Square?

How might we read of Jesus weeping over the city of Jerusalem without making the connections with our own

torn cities and the straining fabric of our society . How can we watch Jesus stand before Pilate claiming: “*my task is to bear witness to the truth*” without being shaken to our core by the distortions, the evasions and deceits of some who hold power in our day? How can we watch all this unfolding before our eyes without some recognition that each of us has within us the seeds of the selfish instincts which, if they continue unchecked, will lead to the crucifixion of Love and Truth and Justice in our day?

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W B Yeats caught the mood in his poem written just after the end of the massacres of the First World War:

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity.”

“ Preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.”

This morning, the Bible in our second reading from the letter to the Philippians, presents us with a claim written by an extremist Jew whose early life had been consumed by a passionate intensity. Saul, the persecutor of the early church, had experienced on the Damascus Road a fundamental awakening which tipped him out of his narrow, ethnic-bound version of Judaism into a vivid encounter with Christ so overwhelming that he writes in today’s epistle: *“For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.”*

He describes the experience in the Book of Acts as like scales falling from his eyes – the archetypal spiritual pattern by which people move from what they thought they always knew to what they now recognise as completely different. For the rest of his life, Paul became obsessed with this Christ. He rarely, if ever, quotes Jesus directly, but writes

from a direct sense of the Divine Presence which had blinded him on the Damascus Road. His driving mission was to demonstrate that Jesus was the Christ – the blueprint, the design behind all creation. He wrote in the letter to the Ephesians: *“God has made known to us his secret purpose, in accordance with the plan which he determined beforehand in Christ.”* Paul regards all humanity as living inside of a common identity, we are all part of the purpose of God whether we recognise it or not, we are all living the life God has given us as the prologue to St John’s Gospel puts it: *“through him all things came to be; without him no created thing came into being.”*

Paul would no doubt have said that the sign of being a Christian therefore is that you can see Christ everywhere.

One of the most powerful descriptions of this comes from the English mystic Caryl Houselander who tells in her autobiography how an ordinary tube train journey turned

into a vision which changed her life: *"I was in a crowded train in which all sorts of people jostled together, sitting and strap-hanging, workers of every description going home at the end of the day. Quite suddenly I saw with my mind, but as vividly as a wonderful picture, Christ in them all. But I saw more than that; not only was Christ in every one of them, sorrowing in them- but because he was in them, and because they were here, the whole world was here too, here in this underground train; not only the world as it was at that moment, not only all the people in all the countries of the world, but all those people who had lived in the past, and all those yet to come.*

I came out into the street and walked for a long time in the crowds. It was the same here, on every side, in every passer-by, everywhere-Christ."

The whole point of our observance of Passiontide and Holy Week is to bring this Divine presence into ever increasing consciousness. To see that the entire physical world around

us is both the hiding place and the revelation place of God, present, reconciling and suffering in plain sight before our eyes. That was the penny that finally dropped for St Peter when he exclaimed: "*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.*"

This kind of recognition changes us for ever. Paul was prepared to lose everything for it. In Passiontide we are called to recognize the presence and the mercy of God in the arrest, the trial and the crucifixion of Jesus: and to recognise also that we are the goal and the object of what God is and does. It is all directed towards our salvation and not only ours but the eternal salvation of everyone who has ever lived.

In Christ all the boundaries humans create are subsumed into a new identity as sons and daughters of God. We are all, leavers and remainers *In Christ* whether we know it or want it or understand it or not.

St Paul's great vision of Christ speaks directly into this crisis of our times.

First, this Universal Christ is the life within all lives and present in all of human history. If we observe Passiontide faithfully but fail to see that Christ is arrested and accused today by those who put ambition and self-interest first, then our observance is in vain. One of the best-known Anglican spiritual writers of the last century was Evelyn Underhill.

She famously wrote: *"The prevalent notion that spirituality and politics have nothing to do with one another is the exact opposite of the truth. Once it is accepted in a realistic sense, the spiritual life has everything to do with politics. It means that certain convictions about God and the world become the moral and spiritual imperatives of our life."*

These moral and spiritual imperatives are being tested on our television screens every day. Our convictions about God will test how ready we are to confront habits of evasion and blaming instead of truth-telling and taking responsibility. It

will test whether we will resist those who would build barriers instead of bridges between peoples of different political convictions and outlooks. It will test our reaction to those who would divide us from each other and distract us from serving the common good.

Second this Christ belongs to no one group, tribe, political party or nation. As the prophet Isaiah shockingly puts it: *“to him nations count as nothingness and emptiness.”* The Bible stands foursquare against those who claim Divine endorsement for any one vision of national life and against any who would treat those with a different vision as enemies or outcasts. Yet Christ on the cross is praying forgiveness for those who have completely failed to recognise who he is.

Third, the example of Christ crucified leads us all to the discovery that it is only when we have reached the end of our resources that we become ready to search out and find the true source of our life. Perhaps then we need to be

praying that our nation might learn and grow from this present crisis. That we might become a humbler people, ready to let go of some of our preoccupations and to enter on a new and larger journey together.

To hold the Bible in one hand today and the newspaper in the other at the beginning of Passiontide is to be reminded that this vision of Christ is costly. Paul was to give his life in pursuit of it. Peter was to lose his life for it. Jesus himself, anointed for burial in today's Gospel, knew in his heart that convictions about the boundless mercy and acceptance of God would lead to his death at the hands of the secular and religious authorities of his day. But he knew too that this was the necessary path to the salvation of our world. As we continue to follow the news with some trepidation this Passiontide we might take hope from Bill Vanstone's great hymn about the Passion of Christ:

*Therefore he who shows us God
Helpless hangs upon the tree;
And the nails and crown of thorns
Tell of what God's love must be.*

*Here is God: no monarch he,
Throned in easy state to reign;
Here is God, whose arms of love
Aching, spent, the world sustain.*

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