Holy Week Addresses 2020

Monday: John 12.1-11

Tuesday: John 12.20-36

Wednesday: John 13.21-32

Maundy Thursday: John 13.1-17, 31b-35

Tuesday – Jesus keeps teaching to the end

This year we journey through Holy Week in the company of St John’s Gospel. Last night we reflected on the episode in which Jesus is anointed by Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. This outraged Judas because of the waste of expensive perfume it involved. Jesus responded by commending Mary for honouring him as the Messiah.

Tonight’s passage begins with the disciples in a bit of a quandary. Some Greeks – proselytes rather than Greek speaking Jews – had arrived for the feast of the Passover keen to meet with Jesus. They approach the two disciples with Greek names - Philip who consults with Andrew and they then both go to find Jesus. Jesus’ response is not to go and speak with the Greek worshippers, but instead to teach Philip and Andrew about discipleship and that all are honoured by God, Jew and Greek. “If anyone serves me, the Father will honour him”. Even at this late stage, Jesus is still teaching the disciples the fundamentals about his identity, his relationship with God and what it means to be called by God to follow Him. Jesus is underlining the essentially universal character of the Christian faith, whilst emphasising that this universality is only possible through his death and resurrection.

The passage then takes a more troubling turn with Jesus expressing anxiety about the future in words almost identical to those he would utter in the Garden of Gethsemane later in the week. “Father, save me from this hour?” he asks. “No, he answers to himself, for this is why this hour has come, this is my purpose.”

I’ve always found great comfort in those moments when Jesus expresses flashes of doubt before regaining his composure as the Son of God. It’s as if the two sides of Jesus – human and divine – are struggling with each other; we witness the human side of Jesus emerging at times of great stress before falling back and submitting to the divine core of his being. Jesus’ ministry began with temptation in the wilderness only for it to end with temptation in the garden. He could have saved himself but would have then failed to save us.

“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

Here is an obvious truth from nature, but also a deeply theological truth about Jesus’ passion. Only with the death and resurrection of Jesus has it been possible for the promise of universal salvation to reach all humankind.

The analogy of the grain of wheat dying in order to bear much fruit, is also true of our own lives. We’re reminded of this in the imagery of the baptism rite as we die to our old selves and find new life in the waters of baptism. That process of death and re-birth continues throughout our lives as we tentatively accept the divine nature that lurks within each one of us, awaiting liberation.

If we are to become truly ourselves as God intends, then we must rid ourselves of the ego and all that promotes our self-satisfaction and self-preservation. Such thinking, sadly, has been the root of much abuse in the life of the church and continues today in one guise or another. Yet at its heart the principle remains true too. For each of us to flourish as human beings made in God’s image, we need to think more of others and less of ourselves. In the end we will discover that the whole of life is about God, and nothing else.

The poverty of our human nature is of course one of the attractions of the character of Peter in the passion narrative; we connect readily with his inadequacy, his cowardice, his embarrassment at having anything to do with the one who is now universally mocked; with his willingness to protect himself by denying Christ (who after all wouldn’t behave as Peter did faced by an array of soldiers?) And yet in denying Christ, he denies himself the opportunity to be Christ too.

This is where the Easter story begins to hit home. For this is the invitation that Christ offers us – to become part of the Christ story ourselves; to be absorbed into his nature, his identity and join in with the mission of God in this world. This is evangelism at its most raw and beautiful through which the gospel becomes irresistible to those who encounter it, for faced with Love itself, who can avert their gaze?