

Year C, Passion Sunday 2010

Isaiah 53.16-21
Psalm 126
Philippians 3.4b-14
John 12.1-8

First a look at Judas

We hear a fair bit about Judas in the next two weeks. Judas is, amongst other things, a hypocrite—today's gospel is at pains to make that clear. We hear him say that money used to buy oil should be given to the poor, whereas the editor of John tells us he wanted to filch it for himself.

I don't see Judas as a particularly bad man. Just weak like us. He was recruited as an agent by a foreign government. We who have imposed our will on foreign lands, we who have been the foreign power for much of the globe, may find that difficult to understand. But with St Patrick's Day last Wednesday, it's worth remembering that things look very different to the Irish and others, to people whose lands we have occupied—are occupying.

So I see Judas's weakness as part of the story. Peter too denied Jesus and Peter's denials are also part of the story. Maybe if Judas hadn't killed himself he'd be a saint like Peter. I suppose the difference between them is that Judas allowed himself to be bought by the opposition. But then so do we all. How many of us have betrayed someone else because of a promise of some benefit, maybe just approval? Some of us may even have betrayed ourselves for the promise of approval. Judas's experience is our experience.

So while I'm not entirely sympathetic to Judas, I'm not entirely unsympathetic either. I am certain that Judas is in all of us

And so was George Herbert.

Self-condemnation

Thou who condemnest Jewish hate,
For choosing Barrabas a murderer
 Before the Lord of glorie;
 Look back upon thine own estate,
Call home thine eye (that busie wanderer):
 That choice may be thy storie.

He that doth love, and love amisse,
This worlds delights before true Christian joy,
 Hath made a Jewish choice:
 The world an ancient murderer is;
Thousands of souls it hath and doth destroy
 With her enchanting voice.

He that hath made a sorrie wedding
Between his soul and gold, and hath preferr'd
 False gain before the true,
 Hath done what he condemnes in reading:
For he hath sold for money his deare Lord,
 And is a Judas-Jew.

Thus we prevent the last great day,
And judge our selves. That light, which sin & passion
 Did before dimme and choke,
 When once those snuffes are ta'ne away,
Shines bright and cleare, ev'n unto condemnation,
 Without excuse or cloke.

Now a look at Mary

Where did she get the nard? What is it? It's a member of Valerian family, from the foothills of the Himalayas, via Persia. It was expensive: Horace offered to send Virgil a whole barrel of his best wine in exchange for a phial of nard. Mark (14,3) and Matthew (26,7) underline its preciousness by telling us that it was contained in an alabaster flask. In the Old Testament, in the Song of Songs, nard is a symbol of the intimate nature of the Bride's love. When the perfume of nard is named, the bride recognizes her beloved as such.

Mary recognises Jesus as her beloved and so uses nard. Mary gives it as a sign of her love. This is the origin of bringing gifts to the Lord.

What do we give as a sign of ours? The Hindus do it better. We bring our gifts of music well practised and well sung, drama and readings well performed, clouds of incense, study and discussion with commitment. Life lived with guts and passion, not dried up, mean and repressed. Life as gift to the Divine. Let us be profligate with worship and life.

And in what spirit do we do it?

The message of Paul is that if we are doing it because we are told to, or because of some promised benefit, we're on the wrong track. That's what Paul used to be like. Before his road to Damascus vision, he thought doing the right thing made him a success in the effort to please God by works.

The point of Christian worship is that we do it because we want to do it. Because it gives us joy to do it. Because it is fun to do it. It's an expression of our joy, our humanity—an explosion of being human.

And more than anything else, Paul tells us not to quit. As Paul addresses the Philippians, he speaks words of encouragement, encouraging them not to give up, but to press on. Even though tough times will come—indeed, are here. Even though this Church needs to reassess its priorities and will find it painful so to do. Do not quit. KBO.

Don't be too worried about doubt, either. Doubt is faith struggling to find truth.

And what for?

Because resurrection follows the pain of passion and death. To understand the beauty and force of the Isaiah and psalm readings, we need to look what they might have meant to the people for whom they were written.

They tell of the desert, 'in the south', the arid area of the Negev (e.g. Petra). Where once a year it rains and just as in the reading from Isaiah the desert blossoms abundantly. Waters break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. And the people are transformed too. They come just to walk in the cool rain, to paddle in the streams and to witness the transformation from a sterile desert to an abundance of life. They come to be refreshed; to be renewed. Isaiah's great vision foretells of transformation and restoration and refreshment. Wholeness.

All this is what confronts us as we begin the remembrance and re-enactment of Jesus' last days in Jerusalem. The dark days of aridity and desertion—not for nothing are the words desert and desertion related—lead to newness and colour and blossom. The two weeks that follow today are a model for what every one of us must do as we shed our old skins—*flesh* as Paul would say. They are a model for what churches need to do in a world where the church is ridiculed by the unchurched. Some of you might not realise the extent to which this is the case, so let me tell you a story.

After a recent 9.30 Baptism I was chatting to a young lad outside. I said, 'and where do you live?'. An adult standing near said most unpleasantly 'don't tell 'im where you live.' Whatever she thought that I might do—and I have my suspicions about that—that is part of the reality of what the church and its ministers are up against. That expresses the need for us to confront what others think of us, and it's the job of all of us to confront this reality full in the face, just as Jesus does after his entry into Jerusalem on a colt, taking us to next week. And remember—look at the East Window—it is the wounds that heal.

In this week of St Patrick, let us pray in his words:

May the strength of God pilot us.

May the power of God preserve us.

May the wisdom of God instruct us.

May the hand of God protect us.

May the way of God direct us.

May the shield of God defend us.

May the host of God guard us against the snares of evil and temptations of the world.

May Christ be with us.

Christ above us. Christ in us. Christ before us.

May your salvation, O Lord, be always ours this day and for evermore, **Amen.**