

Friday 14th April, 2017 - Good Friday
Year A
Isaiah 52:13-53:12
Psalm 22
1 Corinthians 1:18-31
John 18:1-19:42

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

On this Good Friday, in our desire for new life... we follow Christ... Quite literally we walk the path he walked... because he knows the way. Christ teaches us, models for us... that the doorway to new life is powerlessness...

At the Last Supper, Christ Jesus gets up from table, strips himself, and washes the feet of his friends. Later... in the Garden... Christ is taken violently by the Temple and delivered to Rome... where hardened embittered men strip him... for torture and execution. And so it is the naked Christ we watch today... Forget the discreet loincloth of art and film - nakedness is part of Rome's humiliation of the victim... part of the punishment and the deterrent. For unadorned nakedness, then as now, is a thing of shame - there is nowhere for the victim to hide his defeat and impotence. Christ is stripped naked by the soldiers - tortured... then paraded through the streets of Jerusalem carrying the cross-beam.

At Golgotha they crucify him... totally exposed... stretched out with nothing or no-one to shield his naked suffering. This is done *to* him... but he consents to this... he allows it... indeed he embraces it. For this, too, is what he came for. He is the willing victim prophesied by Isaiah (53:1-12)... 'the man of suffering'... the one who 'does not open his mouth in protest.'

Certainly, his journey to this moment of acceptance is not without struggle - his agonised prayer in the Garden shows that... for in Christ Jesus it is our humanity we witness.

But he does consent... he drinks this bitter cup... because he knows this suffering is necessary... it is indeed inevitable... and in the mystery of God, it brings freedom... new life. Not just for him... but for all creation.

All of this, of course, looks like madness... 'foolishness' Paul says. (I Corinthians 1:18-25) And so the conventional voices call out to Jesus... 'Save yourself! Call down the angels... Elijah... anyone!'... 'Don't do this' was the advice all along... from his mother to Peter... 'Don't do this. Not this way!' But what looks like madness is really wisdom... for what looks like death is really life... what looks like failure is actually victory. For this is the way! The Paschal Mystery... New and abundant life lies through suffering and death - you can't by-pass it.

If we would know new life, then we must follow... Christ is unambiguous... "if you want to find true life... then pick up your cross and follow me." His path is our path... We embrace the way of suffering... but ...we don't wallow in victimhood. In the economy of God, one victim is sufficient - Christ gathers all humanity's pain and failure into this one great act of self-offering.

The way before us is not victimhood - so put away all fears of blood-price, punishment and retribution. Rather it is an embrace of pain and suffering, learning to accept them as inevitable... necessary... transformative... and realising that true life lies this way! Rather than defend or close ourselves... we open ourselves to all... accepting and embracing vulnerability...

As human beings, we fear vulnerability... because we know from experience, that such love which leaves us vulnerable also opens the door to pain and suffering. This fear is real... to open ourselves to intimacy does leave us unprotected... and pain will inevitably come as a consequence.

All love is like that - it renders us vulnerable... to joy and delight, yes... and also to the inevitability of suffering. This is a major blockage in our willingness to love, because we fear the vulnerability that opens the door to pain.

Christ Jesus doesn't just *talk* of love... he loves. He walks today's crucifixion path out of love for us. This is what love opens him to... this is what love for the world costs him. We look at him in his total vulnerability... nothing and no-one to protect or defend him... and we know (if we choose to look) this is what it means to love.

Christ is unambiguous... "If you want to find true life... then pick up your cross and follow me." His path is our path... this is the way. In the same way as we might imagine on Palm Sunday, risking leaving the crowd and joining the procession... so we do the same today. We leave the jeering crowd and fall in behind him... exposed and vulnerable to all that means. This is his path... this is our path.

Mercifully, very rarely is this journey so public and so heroic for us... Our walks of vulnerability are more ordinary and everyday... the common pain we all experience and share - sickness, loneliness, grief, disappointment, failed relationships, struggling children... It's so common and universal that we call it LIFE... and so it is. Christ teaches us... today he models for us... accept the pain that comes inevitably with love... indeed embrace it. Be vulnerable not defended, open not closed, for this is necessary and it is transforming - this way leads through suffering and death to true life.

At the Last Supper, Christ Jesus strips himself, and washes the feet of his friends. Later... in the Garden... Christ is taken violently by the Temple and delivered to Rome... where hardened men strip him... for torture and execution. On this day we dare to call Good... he carries his cross, naked and alone through the city, carrying all the pain of the world with him. And on the cross he dies in a self-offering of love for all humanity - he chooses to be totally vulnerable and undefended.

That evening, when it was over, they took his body, clothing its nakedness in grave shrouds... wrapping the body tight in their fear of darkness and decay...

Then they laid it in a sealed defended tomb... an unmovable stone across the entrance...even an armed guard just in case... Nothing can happen now... all vulnerability has been removed... that body's safe and secure now. Nothing can happen now...resurrection? Surely not...

In the name of God, Amen.