

Good Friday 2020

Today we retell the story of ultimate love, a story that reminds us of how precious each and every one of us is in the sight of God. The story began on Sunday when we would normally have held a procession and waved our palm crosses and branches and sang triumphal songs, and today we move from those times of triumph and intimacy to a time of betrayal, torture, humiliation and death.

As the story unfolds roles change. Good friends become betrayers, active participants become spectators, and vocal fans become even more vocal in their condemnation. I occasionally wonder how many of those people who were cheering Jesus into Jerusalem were jeering him as he staggered up the Via Dolorosa to Golgotha. We know that Peter denied Jesus three times, but how many would be disciples turned their back on the man they had labelled their Messiah?

On Palm Sunday I reflected on how well we Anglicans do processions. At the major Diocesan events in the Cathedral one can see the church on show as a procession of deacons, priests, area deans, archdeacons, bishops and the Archbishop make their way to their places accompanied by the triumphal notes of the grand organ. If one judged our church by how well we did these processions we would be spectacularly successful. Rather, the benchmark of how well we function as the Body of Christ and builders of the Kingdom of God is very different. When we proclaim that we are the Body of Christ we proclaim that we are part of the one who paid the ultimate price for the love of humankind. We are called on to be people whose lives are dedicated to service, to loving the unloved, to feeding the hungry, housing the homeless and aiding all in need – to use David Kossoff's words - people who resist the temptation to not get involved.

As part of the confirmation preparation of our candidates we looked at Jesus' death and resurrection.

There was a particularly moving story of a Russian nun called Maria Skobotsova who lived in a convent in Paris during the Second World War. When the German's occupied the city she felt that God was calling her to the risky mission of feeding and hiding Jews. She realized that this could easily lead to her imprisonment and death, but she believed that 'each of us is called to follow Christ and give himself for his friends.' All went well for a month. Hundreds of Jews were hidden by her in the convent and many escaped. However at the end of the month the Gestapo came and Mother Maria was sent to Ravensbrück concentration camp.

At the camp the German guards came to refer to her as 'that wonderful Russian nun.' Many sensed the presence of God in her. She spent two and a half years in the camp. The one day a group of women were lined up outside a building whose sign said "baths" but which were in fact gas chambers for killing people. One woman became hysterical. Calmly, Mother Maria took her place in the line and became her substitute. She passed through

the doors and into the gas chambers. It was Good Friday 1945.

Maria Skobotsova died in the place of the scared woman about to be killed. Christians believe that, in Jesus, God died in our place because he loves us.

To be a Christian means to be involved in the world around us; to live out our faith and not just give lip service to it. In more recent times we have seen the example of Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador in the late 1970's. At this time government death squads roamed the nation killing with impunity anyone who spoke out against them. Some in the church remained silent and even conspired to support the government; however between 1968 and 1979 approximately 1,500 priests, nuns and active lay people were arrested, kidnapped, tortured, defamed, exiled or assassinated. Oscar Romero was elected to his role as Archbishop because he was thought to be weak, however God had chosen him for a very special role and he used his

position to speak out against the tyranny that had beset his country. In his words “let my blood be a seed of freedom and the sign that hope will soon be a reality.” He was assassinated while saying Mass on 24th of March 1980. His death was a catalyst for meaningful opposition to oppression and signalled to the world that the love of God could still overcome the power of evil.

I pray that none of us is ever called on to make the sort of sacrifice that Maria Skobotsova or Oscar Romero had to make, however our role as Christians is to be more than people who enjoy processions or grand church music. However should we be called on to risk our lives in the service of our fellow human beings we know that God is there with us. God understands our fears and God shares our pain because God has shared our humanity. Good Friday reminds us that we are called on to get involved, and to make a difference to this world in which we live. As Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Father your will not mine.” If we give ourselves over to God’s will as Jesus did then we will walk in God’s way

and walk it in faith. It may be a relatively smooth road, or it may be our own Via Dolorosa – our way of sorrows – a path in which every step is painful and our cross gets heavier; a path on which we cry out “My God why have you forsaken me?” But God has promised that for those who walk this path He will be with us even to the end of our days. We are called on to walk our path through this world not immune to its pain and sorrow but taking it on as Jesus did. We are called on to walk the path and not to be a spectator.

As David Kossoff wrote “A person can make a life’s work of not getting involved, of keeping himself to himself, and wake up one day, by himself. He can make a lifelong habit of not hearing cries for help until all he can hear are his own.

May your walk be with God this day and always.

Amen.