

5th Sunday of Lent

17th March 2013

Sung Mass at St. Michael's Church, Louth and
Holy Communion at St. Andrew's Stewton

Approaching the Passion

Today is the day that has traditionally been called Passion Sunday; it marks the start of the final countdown as Lent turns into Passiontide and leads us into the reliving of the last days of Christ in Holy Week. During Lent we have also been thinking about what it means to pray the Lord's Prayer – and as we come to this final week in the sequence, we reflect on what it means to pray that we are delivered from evil.

So, before we start to walk alongside Christ (as we will literally do at the beginning of next Sunday's Eucharist) we have a chance to reflect on what we are expecting to live out in our spiritual journey over the coming days and weeks – and how this relates to the claim that God delivers us from evil. This is a time when we might look back on what we, and those who have gone before have experienced, and try to work out what we believe and why. It is a time to reflect on how the eternal truths of God's saving love affect us, and how we can communicate this to those who might notice that we live life slightly differently from those who do not have the same enlivening faith as us.

With this in mind it might be helpful to remind ourselves of the four classic ways that the Church has found of understanding the Passion of Christ as it has journeyed through the centuries – each has a ground in biblical texts, but as time has passed men and women have found different ways of understanding what Jesus' death meant for them in their time and their place. And we have to work out what it means for us in our place and our time.

Christus victor/Ransom

The first way of understanding what happened on the Cross often refers to Christ as victor, although many find it easier to think of it as Christ paying a ransom. This model focuses on the various ways in which Jesus' death can be seen as the conquering of evil powers by way of a cosmic conquest. This view of atonement has early roots and was particularly important in the early years of the Church. The biblical precedent for such an understanding can be found, among other places, in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians where Paul talks of death being swallowed up in victory – the Devil's ransom is paid and we are delivered from evil.

Sacrifice

Drawing on both the Old Testament and classical structures of sacrificial worship, the second way the Church understood the death of Jesus on the cross was as a sacrifice made by man for the sake of mankind. More specifically this is associated with the re-enactment of the Passover sacrifice – something we remember on Maundy Thursday. The key elements of this model are the perfection and innocence of Jesus and his combined role as both priest and sacrificial object. The key biblical text for this model is provided by the Letter to the Hebrews which draws strongly on the themes of the Jewish priesthood fulfilled in Christ, through His death.

Forgiveness

The next stage in the development of Christian understanding of the atonement, at least in part, took the form of a reaction against the earlier models of Christ as Victor

and His death as a sacrifice. At the centre of any model of atonement lies the question of how the human divorce from God is to be reconciled. Rather than placing the fault on man's captivity to a quasi-supernatural devil figure the varied models based on the idea of forgiveness act on the basis that it is man's actions, active or passive, that create this distance. The only way in which this gap can be bridged is by an act of Divine forgiveness; the essential question being who can offer this forgiveness? God can forgive, but such forgiveness is only 'just' if man has paid the price – thus God, as judge, also places himself in the position of the sinless sinner – paying a price so that man may be free. In biblical terms the foundations for this idea can be found expressed clearly in much of the Paul's writing.

Exemplary

In many ways the fourth, exemplary understanding flows from the first three models of the atonement: for example, the exemplary nature of Christ's actions are a feature of both Irenaeus and Augustine when they talk about ransom and sacrificial understandings of the atonement. However, the exemplary understanding of the atonement did, over time, increase in its significance; at first as complementing other understandings in these ways and in recent centuries as an alternative understanding in its own right.

So here we have four understandings of what the coming events mean for us. Each says something particular and all of them approach Jesus' death from a different angle. The result is that there are also conflicts – they can't all be right unless they are all only partial in their understanding.

But what does all of this mean for us? Do we have to listen to each understanding, evaluate and work out where we sit?
Fortunately not!

All our words are incapable of describing the full truth of what Jesus' death might mean...

The only real way that we can understand the death and resurrection of Jesus is to experience it ourselves. In truth this is what we do every week as we come together, lay our daily lives as an offering before Christ and join in fellowship to hear his word and share with Him in bread and wine. But the fullness of this meeting with Christ is only really effective if we have been with him – if we understand the fellowship of Jesus with his disciples: the regular fellowship that they shared at table and the desperation as they realised what lay ahead as they shared that last meal.

How can we understand the desolation of the Cross unless we have stood before it?
How can we sense the wonder and awe of Easter unless, early in the morning we have seen the light of the world kindled from the darkness of the tomb?

All of these experiences sit underneath the words and ceremonies of the coming fortnight and, as we enter passion-tide, we have a final chance to prepare for this – to stand back and set aside one week to walk with Christ: to enter Jerusalem in triumph next Sunday morning, to join together in Christ's presence and share in the Last Supper, to stand at the Cross and to wake on Easter morning to the glory of a new day.

And as we meet others in our daily lives they might see some of this light reflected in our own words and action: they might ask us what our faith means and we have a choice: we can use many words or we can simply say 'Come – walk with Christ; walk with me'.