

(Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33)

You don't need me to tell you that today is the anniversary of the beginning of the first Lockdown. 52 weeks ago, we celebrated Mothering Sunday in a very different way from last week's celebration. With the Lockdown imminent, that was the last service to be held in this church for many months. It was attended by just six people, and with no means then for anyone to attend virtually it was held very much on behalf of everyone who was *not* there. How important it was then, as with this year, for us all to know through the distribution of the Mothering Sunday primulas, that we belong to each other and are there for each other, even when unable to be so in person. Sadly, on both occasions there were not enough flowers for everyone, so I invite each of us to view *this* one here as 'your' primula!

This symbolism is a little bit like Spiritual Communion: we may not be able to receive the sacrament physically, but by attending this service virtually we know that he who 'binds us together' – with each other and with him – is here. 'The Lord is here. His Spirit is with us'.

The last twelve months have seen huge changes in how we see and understand everything. Our priorities have shifted; we have all had to learn new skills; we have each had to learn how to *wait*. Indeed, the writer WH Vanstone, in his classic book 'The Stature of Waiting' explores what it is to shift from being active to being passive.

He reminds us that the word 'passion' is derived from the Greek *πάσχω* which means 'to experience', or 'to be done to'. So when we think of the Passion of Christ we think primarily (and rightly) of his suffering for us, but it is more than that. Jesus knew what it was suddenly to shift from being the active teacher and miracle-worker to being the passive object of other people's actions. In a profound way, Jesus knew what it was to have to *wait*.

And in effect, he had become a *patient*; literally, a person who is 'done to'. Now, the word 'patient' has the same Greek root as 'passion' – and this tells us that anyone who becomes a patient, who becomes the passive object of other people's actions, enters into passion.

So as we enter into Passion-tide, the final two weeks of Lent, we are invited to reflect not only on the deep significance of Christ's willingness to suffer for us (and how he suffered), but also of his willingness to hand himself over and wait to be 'done to'; to allow human beings to do to him *whatever* they chose. In other words, the omnipotent Son of God chose of his own free-will to surrender his divine 'impassibility' to become fully as we are!

This Passiontide, as our waiting continues, may we enter more deeply than ever into the truth that the Lord Jesus became as we are in order that we might become like

him. Truly, he ‘binds us together’ – with each other and with him – with ‘cords that cannot be broken’!

Now in our gospel reading today, we heard the impassioned cry, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus!’. That cry from the heart – which one year on from the first Lockdown we surely all echo – is answered in the symbol of this primula, in the outward and visible sign of the sacrament of Holy Communion, and whenever we look to the Cross.

In the human being who hung there we *see Jesus*, very God and very man, ‘lifted up from the earth’. He has shown himself truly to be as we are – whilst remaining at one with his Father, with whom he therefore binds us all together. And as we gaze upon him on the Cross we see that in being ‘lifted up from the earth’ he is in fact *glorified*. As the words of the old hymn put it, ‘God is reigning from the Tree’.

And the words of the well-known prayer from Archbishop Desmond Tutu may also come to mind:

Victory is ours:
goodness is stronger than evil;
love is stronger than hate;
light is stronger than darkness;
life is stronger than death;
victory is ours through him who loves us.

As each of today’s readings underline, the enduring and empowering message of the Cross is that it was precisely through his Passion that Jesus was glorified. He proved that ‘love is stronger than hate’, and by so doing he showed us that this same ‘victory is ours, through him who loves us’.

So in line with what I was saying in my sermon two weeks ago, from the depths of our Lenten journey we are being invited to see glory in the Cross and in the Resurrection beyond. In becoming as we are Christ invites and enables us to reign with him in glory. The Cross is the symbol of God’s promise that whatever suffering we may experience there is nothing he cannot redeem. After all, we also know deep within us that ‘Now the green blade riseth’!

Before I close I would like to take this opportunity just to mention another aspect of how our ‘wish to see Jesus’ may be fulfilled. The last year has led to many of us moving online in so many areas of our lives – from supermarket shopping, to blended learning in schools and colleges, to countless Zoom meetings. It has meant that we spend less time travelling and that many events are now designed primarily for an online audience.

A case in point is our growth and development as disciples of Christ. Here at St Mary’s, with our home groups having been suspended there had been little provision for online learning until we launched our Lent Groups. In the meantime, I do hope that none of us had left it until Lent to pick up a book to learn more of Jesus! But with many of us having found excellent online worship resources from churches and

cathedrals all over the country, we have also discovered that there are many superb online discipleship resources, all specifically designed for distance learning.

May I commend to you the Digital Learning Platform of our own Diocese. Just google 'Leeds Diocese Learning' and you will find a huge range of online day events or short courses to enable you to grow and develop as a disciple of Christ. If we 'wish to see Jesus' then in this sense the developments of the last 52 weeks have made it easier than ever to do so!

Thanks be to God, passionate and strong, tender and careful, reigning from the Tree. Amen.