**Sermon for SJB Passion Sunday 21/3/2021**

I had a text last week from a member of our congregation that’s still resonating with me. She’s going through a particularly tough time herself and also feeling very keenly the sorrow of her bereaved friend. I could almost hear the anguish in her voice as I read it. It said, “Don’t you wish you could just wave a magic wand and make all this bad stuff go away?” I absolutely get it. I do! I could spend the rest of this sermon, maybe the rest of the day, listing the current “bad stuff” happening all around us and in the world at large and probably so could many of you.

Can our faith really help us with all of this? Yes! But not by giving us a sanitised way out of pain and suffering, that’s for sure. And trotting out nice Bible quotes to people in pain is a definite No no! Our veiled crosses here in church today are a stark visual reminder that today is Passion Sunday, the start of Passiontide following Jesus’s final journey to the cross.

Just a brief reminder if you need one that the meaning of the word passion has changed over the centuries. Its original meaning is from the Latin, to suffer, and that’s what it still means in church-speak. Suffering.

**We** can’t avoid pain and suffering in this broken world, but **Jesus** could have avoided it, just as he could have avoided being hungry in the wilderness by turning stones into bread. He’s the human face of God for Heavens sake! Fully human, yes, and fully divine too. But he actually chooses to go through with all that agony, rather than deny who he really is, the one who embodies God’s everlasting love and total solidarity with our fallen, suffering humanity. In the eyes of the religious authorities of his day, blasphemy! In the eyes of those who see and believe, the eternal, unfailing source of life and hope.

Today’s gospel reading begins shortly after Jesus’s arrival in Jerusalem.

He’s come, accompanied by a great crowd, for what he knows will be his final time at the great Passover Festival. Just before this, he stops at the village of Bethany just outside the city.

Bethany, the home of his friends Martha ,Mary and Lazarus who’ve often given him hospitality.

When he arrives Lazarus has lain dead in a tomb for four long hot days. Jesus weeps with Lazarus’s sisters and then calls their brother out of the tomb back to life. A great demonstration of his divine authority. He enters the city in dramatic fashion, riding on a donkey accompanied by adoring crowds waving palm branches, hailing him as Messiah. That’s clearly a piece of deliberate planning on Jesus’s part, acting out the ancient prophecy of how the messiah will enter the holy city. And now he’s all set to give his last public teachings. Yes, he’s come to Jerusalem openly this time, exposing himself to the full wrath of the religious authorities. He’s not going to compromise with the truth to save himself. He’s going all the way.

On more than one occasion he’s said rather mysteriously that his hour has not yet come. **Now** he says, “**The hour has come** for the son of man to be glorified. Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

Let’s unpack that image a little. We all know that unless you bury a seed in the earth, all the potential life inside it will never get a chance to come out. As it finally breaks open, deep down in the darkness , its embryo, its potential life force inside, is released. Only then can it begin to grow. Its root goes down and its shoot goes up and finally it can blossom and fruit.

This word picture works on more than one level, as Jesus’s intriguing word pictures so often do.

First and foremost he’s talking about his own death, showing that his death is necessary to bring new life, that the cross will be a place of glory, and of reconciliation. God affirms this in a voice from heaven. To some it sounds like thunder, to others more discerning, something divine.

In dying, like a seed in the ground, Jesus will become a fruit-bearing vine, giving life to its branches- -another of the illustrations that he uses later, speaking to his intimate friends at their last supper together. “I am the vine”, he says, “you are the branches”. The branches can only bear fruit by abiding in the vine-abiding in his love, by keeping his commandments, as if the commandments are inscribed on their hearts.

The seed picture and the vine picture show us truths about the church- about us -as well. When I read up about the seed, I was struck by the fact that its outer dry shell is also a protective layer. And yet that needs to be buried and broken to let the seed come to life.

What are the attitudes, prejudices, comfort zones that you and I cling to for protection, that hold us back, that need to be buried and broken, so that the life planted within us by God can shoot up and bear fruit? And what about the church? What needs to be cast off, buried and broken, in order for the church’s full life potential to burst out of its protective shell?

Our natural tendency as humans, is to be centred on ourselves, and to try and find whatever security and protection we can. If a church lives in and for itself, its protective shell means that its embryo of life and fruitfulness is stuck inside. It will eventually wither and die.

Jesus goes on to say “Those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life”. A Hebrew scholar I know explained it to me like this: The root of the word translated as ‘hate’ here actually means to treat something as of secondary importance and desirability.

If our first desire is to gain what we can for ourselves in life, to try and find comfort and security in what we can hold onto, more than in God and in His promises, we will certainly be the losers. But if our first desire is to follow in Jesus’ footsteps, to serve him and glorify his name, we shall come to know a comfort and security and peace that nothing in this word can give us. And more than that, we’ll be liberated not only to enjoy the gifts and blessings showered on us, but to share them with others, precisely because we can see them as gifts, not as something expected or deserved or something we’re entitled to.

As he delivers these final teachings, Jesus’s life on earth is now approaching its cosmic climax.

He will be lifted up as he predicts**, l**ifted up on a cross to die, lifted up from death at the resurrection and lifted up from the earth to return to the Father a few weeks later at the ascension. Questions about who Jesus is, where he’s come from, and with what authority he speaks will be answered. His disciples will be the first to understand more fully.

After Jesus is raised, after he’s glorified, they’ll come to see much more clearly who he is and what he’s been doing.

John says, “They remembered,” And he makes it crystal clear that he’s writing so that we can see too: “These things are written”, he says, “so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that believing, you may have life in his name”.

That we- -you and I-- may have life in his name..

Jesus’s illustration of the seed is powerful. God’s Creation teaches us all the time if we’re ready to learn and he’s been teaching me this week on my own patio. Last autumn I read somewhere about planting bulbs lasagne style. I was puzzled but reading on I found out that it meant in layers. I have a large patio tub and carefully followed the instructions: Tulips at the bottom, Daffodils in the next layer and crocuses at the top. I watched eagerly for signs of new life but when the crocuses had been up for ages in gardens all around me and the daffodils were already blooming everywhere else, my tub was only showing a few leaves. I was so disappointed. I thought I must have done something wrong. I’d buried the bulbs very deep, maybe too deep. Had they rotted and died? NO! Suddenly in the last couple of days beautiful strong purple crocuses and delicate white ones have mysteriously sprung into life! When the sun comes out they open right up and seem to be smiling at me. I shall wait much more patiently for the next two layers, still mysteriously growing in the darkness below!

There’s no magic wand for my friend in her dark time, nor for any of us, but God is always at work in our lives, whether we’re conscious of him or not. At work in creation all around us.

Over the next two weeks we’re invited to ponder the events leading up to Good Friday and Easter Day. There ‘ll be plenty of resources to help us on our church website, in church face to face and probably on radio and TV as well. I pray that we will all have a very fruitful Passiontide and real joy at Easter when it comes. Amen.

Carole Lewis