

Passion Sunday

St. Brandon's

John 12:20-33

18th March 2018

According to our readings sheet, today is the 5th Sunday of Lent, but it also goes by another name – Passion Sunday. In other words, a Sunday when we focus on the passion of Jesus, His suffering. And this leads into a season within a season, in that the next two weeks of Lent are also known as Passiontide. It's not particularly something we've focused on here – for us the 'special' period in Lent has typically been the one week from Palm Sunday through Holy Week. But I suspect it's because it is Passion Sunday leading into Passiontide that Bishop David Stancliffe chose tonight for the Bach St John Passion here – with similar events around the rest of the country.

But Passion Sunday also goes by another name – Carlin Sunday. Has anyone come across that before? Carlin peas are black peas left to dry on the plant, something that dates back to the 12th Century. To cook they're baked for an hour, fried with butter or dripping for a few minutes, and are sometimes served with rum and brown sugar (yum!). It's apparently (according to Wikipedia!) a north-east custom to call today Carlin Sunday after the population of Newcastle was saved from starvation in a siege when a ship arrived from Norway on that day carrying a cargo of those very peas. This happened, again according to Wikipedia, in either 1327 or 1644 – which makes it all sound rather unlikely!

But perhaps reviving this tradition sounds attractive, so maybe it's something we should add to the person specification for the new Priest-in-Charge: "Should be willing to resurrect old customs particularly those involving peas". Add to that the highly desirable quality of leading expeditions to the west coast of Ireland to set out in flimsy craft in search of unknown lands, and that should sort out the women from the boys!

Now the link from Carlin peas to our Gospel reading this morning is, I admit, pretty tenuous (though there is a link I'll come back to). But the Gospel reading is, of course, an appropriate reading for Passion Sunday. And there's a lot in it. There are Greeks, proselytes to Judaism, who had come to the Passover festival, who certainly didn't get a straight answer to their request to see Jesus. But, assuming they stuck around, they would have got some sort of answer from what they saw and heard. And they seemed to act as some kind of trigger, as Jesus' response to their request is to say that His 'hour' has come, the hour for Him to be glorified. He has resisted this idea of His hour coming throughout the gospel, notably when his mother tried to talk him into solving the lack of wine at the wedding in Cana (2:1-11). But now His hour has come and, after words about a grain of wheat, losing lives, following Him and being honoured by the Father as a result – most of which we'll come back to – Jesus then has His 'Gethsemane' moment when He is troubled and seems to wonder which way to go. John's gospel doesn't include the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane which is in the other three gospels, but here we have a similar moment of anguish and decision – and a decision to go through with it. And here, that decision is quite dramatically confirmed by the voice from heaven, and leads to Jesus' declaration that judgement has come and the ruler of this world will be driven out – a similarly dramatic claim.

And then, almost by way of conclusion, although the scene continues beyond our reading, Jesus says these words: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself". And, as John comments, "He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die". In other words, Jesus is referring to His death on a cross. And it's that which I want to concentrate on this morning, on this Passion Sunday.

There is no doubt that this statement of Jesus indicates that we are moving to the focal point of the gospel. And Jesus' claim is that somehow, being crucified on a cross will act as a magnet and draw all people to Him. Now we might want to say that this has been only partially effective. Yes, some people have been

drawn to Jesus throughout Christian history of course, but obviously there are many who haven't. But let's leave that, and the possible explanation that, in the end, every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord (Phil. 2:10-11), and focus on ourselves as people who have been drawn, or perhaps are being drawn to Jesus. And perhaps two questions here will help us. First, what is it that we are drawn *by* when we see Jesus lifted up on a cross? And second, what are we drawn *into* as a result?

What are we drawn by? And first I would want to say that we should tread carefully in seeking to answer this, for we are on holy ground and we are entering a mystery which is so profound as to be limitless in its depths. But that does not mean that we should not try, indeed we must try even while acknowledging that we will barely understand the half of it.

On the cross we see a crucified God, a murdered God, a God who is dead. And surely we might immediately want to say that this is no way to run a universe. God isn't supposed to suffer and die. But one former bishop has said of the cross, "The crucified Jesus is the only accurate picture of God the world has ever seen, and the hands that hold us in existence are pierced with unimaginable nails".¹

Difficult as it is to imagine, we have to take it that this is what happened to the God revealed to us in Jesus, and that this gives us a completely accurate picture or understanding of God. And what this understanding of God says to us first and foremost is something about the darkness of the world and God's reaction to it. "Here is God come among us in weakness and humility to stand with us in his world and share its pain."² And its pain and darkness is only too sickeningly real and close – "the Holocaust [and all other ways in which people have and still do oppress others], ... the cancer cell, the terrorist bomb and the black depression, the experience of sickness, pain or bereavement that can send you spinning and paralyse you emotionally and spiritually".³ And "if you press more and more deeply into the darkness you will never find a God who answers our bewildered questions but one who enters into them himself – a God who is revealed in the only terms we can understand as one who shares in the dirt and the pain, the weakness, the loneliness and the dying that we experience ourselves."⁴

In other words, God has compassion for us – com-passion meaning to suffer with. God suffers with us and "there is no way we can make sense of the Passion of Jesus unless we understand it as the compassion of God".⁵ And, of course, God's compassion revealed on the cross stems from, and reveals to us in a way that nothing else could, the very heart of God which is sacrificial love. God wouldn't have done this unless He was love. Genuine and sacrificial love could do no other.

And in the very act of suffering with us, this compassionate, loving God passes judgement on the world and so drives out the ruler of this world, He absorbs all the pain and darkness of the world and in us. In other words, as we say week by week, He takes away the sin of the world. It looks like weakness, this isn't the way you would expect God to run the universe, but it's actually the way of glory because love, God's sacrificial love, is revealed in the most extraordinary way, and this love will win out in the end.

That is, I think, at the heart of what we are drawn *by* when we see Jesus lifted up on the cross. What, then, are we drawn *into* as a result? Three things, quite briefly. First, healing. The image of Jesus being "lifted up from the earth" is taken from the OT, when the Israelites were in the wilderness and poisonous snakes were biting them. And God told Moses to put a bronze snake on a pole and those who had been bitten could look at it, and be healed and live (Numbers 21:4-9). It's like the Carlin peas which saved the people of

¹ John Austin Baker, Bishop of Salisbury 1982-93, quoted in Michael Mayne, *Dust that dreams of glory*, Canterbury Press, 2017, p. 42.

² Michael Mayne, op. cit., p. 41.

³ Ibid., p. 54.

⁴ Ibid., p. 54.

⁵ Ibid., p. 26

Newcastle from starvation and death. We are drawn into the healing of ourselves, healing of body, mind or spirit even if the healing isn't always what we might imagine or desire, and the healing of our world, when we see Jesus lifted up on the cross.

Second, forgiveness. This isn't explicit in our Gospel reading, but it follows from the Passion of Christ and His words on the cross, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" (Luke 23: 34). One of the fundamental ways in which the sacrificial love of God reveals itself is in offering forgiveness. It is perhaps part of our healing to receive that for ourselves, and then to pass it on to others. We are drawn into forgiveness when we see Jesus lifted up on the cross.

And third new life. As Jesus Himself says when He says that His hour has come, this is like a grain of wheat dying. It looks like tragedy, it *is* tragedy, but it leads to new life and much fruit. The tragedy actually leads to triumph – through death into new life. We are ourselves drawn into and receive the promise of new life when we see Jesus lifted up on the cross.

We are drawn *by* the compassion of God, God suffering with us, God sharing all the darkness and dirt of this world with us, which reveals the love of God for us when we see Jesus lifted up on the cross. We are drawn *into* healing, forgiveness and new life when we see Jesus lifted up on the cross.

And maybe that does need the two weeks of Passiontide to even begin to take it in.

Amen.