

Isaiah 53:4-12; Mark 10: 35-45

The Way of the Cross

'I am the Way, the truth and the Life', says Jesus, memorably. In today's reading from Mark, we are 'on the way' with him, and his friends, towards Jerusalem, where Jesus will be crucified. Hearing this in the context of daily news from Jerusalem just heightens the sense of tension and volatility, the proximity of violence... not so different from Jesus' day, when brutal Roman rule held sway, but tragically, as humankind has developed increasingly effective means, the scale of destruction wreaked on our neighbours has grown ever more appalling. Please support the current DEC appeal for the humanitarian crisis in the Middle East; the Christian Aid information on this is at the back, on the font.

Jesus, on the road, has been warning his friends of what lies ahead: predicting his death and explaining, three times so far in Mark's account, that following him means 'taking up the cross' and suffering too. But he has also taken James and John, with Peter up the mountain to witness his Transfiguration, that vision of Jesus in glory with Moses and Elijah on his left and right and a voice from heaven saying, 'This is my Son, listen to Him!'

Now James and John are asking to sit on his left and right, like Moses and Elijah! In Matthew's gospel, it's their mum:

Jesus, how about a special favour for my boys?

We hear the back story, brothers abandoning the family fishing business in Capernaum, Dad Zebedee's retirement out of the window, all because of *you* Jesus.

So, now you're a celebrity, surely some recognition for my boys would be nice?

Before we see Jesus' response, let's just ask how often *we* do bargains with God... at some level expecting blessing in return for sacrifice or service? And rather than criticising James and John, let's remember *everything* we receive from God is gift and grace, we can't earn any of it. Paul sums up what we *deserve* for our failure to live as God intended, to love others and steward his creation, and writes, *the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord*. With God, we live not by greed, but by grace, not by rules, but in relationship, not through trade with God but trust in God.

So back to James and John and that somewhat arrogant request! Jesus replies with a question for them:

Are you able to drink the cup that I will drink, or to be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with?

Quick as a flash they say, 'We are able.' I wonder how many times they rued those words in the dark days that followed? ...*to drink the cup that I will drink?* We think of the Last Supper, when Jesus will hold up the cup of wine, tell them it's his blood, pass it to them to drink and remember. James and John drank, that fateful last evening, and in the early church they continue to share bread and wine in remembrance of him, as he told them, as we still do. But James and John were also there later with Jesus in the garden as he prayed.

*'Father, take **this cup** from me; yet not what I want but what you want.'*

This cup is his suffering and death — for in the garden Jesus knows the full horror of it: humiliation, isolation, pain; separation from his Father, bearing the brokenness of all the world. He knows what it will mean to be poured out *as a ransom for many*, in the words of Isaiah that he quotes in the passage we heard...

James and John are there as Jesus prays — asleep. They can't drink *his cup* or share *his baptism*. Only Jesus, God incarnate, can conquer death and pass through its deep dark waters to eternal life.

James and John may have received John's earlier baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, but *this* baptism is God's rescue of humanity and all creation from slavery to sin. **This** baptism takes us through death, to life.

For all their confidence, James and John will realise that they're **not** able to drink their master's cup or share in his baptism, though later, because of what Jesus achieves for them, and us, on the cross, they will be able — to drink the cup and receive the baptism, of the new, eternal life which Jesus has made possible.

However much James and John, or we, want to avoid the cross, ignore Jesus' words and warnings, it's only through the cross that salvation is won. The cross stands at the very heart of our faith: it always has.

So, on this last Sunday with you, I'm thankful that these were our set readings. I wouldn't have changed them, because my faith, our faith, is in Jesus Christ, our Servant King, who has shown us a new way to live, a revolutionary way of love and service, the way of the cross.

Ten days ago, I was invited to speak at Durham school and decided to tell them the story of St Brandon's church. I suggested they come and visit and look for the cross —

John's charred cross above the chancel arch here. For me, it's the very heart of this church and her story. I still remember learning that after the fire, when Sunday worship moved to the village hall with that cross on the wall, it was never taken down for seven years, until it retook its place in this newly restored building.

Its place, rightly, is above the table here, a reminder of the death and resurrection of this building, the death and resurrection of our Saviour Jesus Christ which we recall with thanksgiving as we celebrate the eucharist, as we will today.

Yet the life Jesus offers through the cross is not only for those who come into church, but for everyone, everyone who uses the village hall now, visits the castle, plays golf, walks the dog, lives in your street, works alongside you, shares your community, your life.

As Christ's disciples, we carry the cross inwardly wherever we go, as we share in the pain and suffering of others, and as we share our hope in Christ, and our determination to work for peace and justice, with love.

I leave here with deep thankfulness to God for all we've shared in these past five and a half years, all the love and kindness we've received, all we've learned of God's faithfulness. I won't ever forget, of course, those dark years of lockdown when we were again exiled from the church.

I took this cross of nails from the vestry, and placed it on the table I used at home when I celebrated communion online, as a reminder of that earlier exile after the fire, which led to new life. And as has often been said, St Brandon's never stopped meeting to worship throughout the pandemic, we found a new *Zoom* way of being church together.

During the long winter 2021 lockdown, in the Rectory, of course Nick was..... painting. Painting and praying, creating first a Faith candle, Brandon's boat sailing through stormy waters; faith its anchor.

Next came the yellow Hope candle, that daffodil emerging from the dark. We made tags of it for 50 simple bunches of daffs on Mothering Sunday, placed in church for families to collect as signs of Hope — all 50 gone by Monday morning — perhaps *you* came and took one?

Finally, for Good Friday, Nick painted the red Love candle with **the cross** at the centre, and the words of St Paul intertwined.

and now faith, hope and love remain, these three, but the greatest of these is love.

That's why the Love candle hangs higher than the others.

The greatest symbol of love we have is the cross, sign of the self-giving unconditional love of God for us and all people. But it's an empty cross: Jesus who died also rose to life and is alive today.

In April 2021 our first service back in church was Easter morning, celebrating resurrection, even if the singing through masks was less glorious than usual!

These three candles will stay here, they're our gift to you. They've become part of St Brandon's, part of this remarkable church with her compelling story of faith, hope and love, which draws people in to encounter God, who made himself known in Jesus and gave his life so we may live.

May St Brandon's people and building, be a blessing to all who come here regularly, occasionally, just once, openly or in secret, accidentally or intentionally, in sorrow or in joy, together or alone. May you continue to share the unconditional welcome and unfailing love of God in all you do and are.

I have one other small gift for you today. It's a 'holding' or 'pocket' cross, made from Palestinian olive wood, from trees like those under which Jesus prayed in Gethsemane, and chose to take up his cross. Whatever you face, now or in the future, please hold onto it, know (as they say in my home town) you'll never walk alone know that Jesus, risen and alive, is with you and will bring you safely home.

I hope you'll all come forward at Communion this morning to receive bread and wine, or a prayer of blessing. As you return to your seat, you might like to take a cross from the basket. There aren't so many as I'd hoped, due to a delivery hitch, so please share if you can, and there are also coin crosses for each of the children.

Hold fast to the cross, hold fast to Jesus, our crucified, risen and ascended Lord, and as you do so, carry God's love with you wherever you are, wherever you go, to his praise and glory.

Amen.