

Brancepeth sermon
3 April 2026
Good Friday

Hebrews 10.16-25

John 18.1-end of 19

Psalms 22

May I speak in the name of God,

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

Amen.

A few weeks ago, Hester and I watched *A Month in the Country*,

a film now nearly forty years old,

starring a very young Colin Firth

and an even younger Kenneth Brannagh.

Firth plays Tom Birkin,

a man recently returned from fighting

in the trenches of the First World War,

who has been employed to uncover and restore a medieval mural
hidden on one of the walls of a rural parish church.

Slowly, over the course of the film,
as he dabs away the whitewash,
an image is revealed – and its an image of judgment.

There might once have been such an image here in Brancepeth –
they were very common, before the Reformation –
so there may well have been on the wall up here, above the arch,
an image of Christ lifted up on his throne,
and seated as the Judge of the World,
passing down his sentences upon all the people of the world,
and sending them either to reward – or to dreadful punishment.

In other words, what Tom Birkin's cleaning brush slowly revealed
above the heads of that village congregation,
was an image of the Last Day, the Day of Judgment,
the Day when the truth of things will be laid bare
all desires known, and no secrets hid –
the great and terrible Day of the Lord.

And what I want to suggest to you, this afternoon,
in this Good Friday service,
is that there is a sense in which *this day has already happened* –
that *Good Friday* is the day
when all the whitewash is removed,
and Jesus is revealed as our Judge –
because, in a sense, Good Friday *is* the Day of Judgment.

Now I know that this may seem like a strange thing to say,
in the light of all we heard in our readings,
because although our long Gospel reading was full of judgment,
far from showing us *Jesus* as judge,
it showed us, again and again, Jesus as the one judged by others.
He stands before Annas, then before Caiaphas,
then before Pilate,
in the dock, enduring their judgment,
and then condemned by them to death.
And when he is lifted up, it is not to be enthroned,
not to sit in the judgment seat of God,
but to be nailed to the cross, and killed.

* * *

But. Something more than that is going on.

Something deeper.

Something else is also taking place

as that sequence of trials proceeds,

and in the terrible lifting up that follows.

And to understand what this *something deeper* is,

I want you to reflect on a very simple experience.

You may have had the experience, when cleaning,

of thinking some surface is spotless,

but then of wiping it with a properly clean cloth,

and only then realising how much grime is still there –

seeing it properly because of the marks it leaves on that clean cloth.

The clean cloth *reveals* the dirt you could not otherwise see.

Well, in the same way, the trial, the condemnation,

the sentencing, and the execution of this innocent man,

this *wholly* innocent man,

reveals something about the grime of our world.

Jesus' life was *pure*; he was filled with the love of God;
he lived, alone amongst all who surrounded him,
the life that he was meant to live,
the life that we are *all* meant to live –
but in what happened on Good Friday,
we see that the world into which Jesus came
did not let innocence live;
in what happened on Good Friday,
we see that the world into which Jesus came
couldn't – *wouldn't* – find space for the love of God,
but forced it out onto the cross.

So what happened on the cross
showed this world up for what it is.

The cross *revealed* the nature of the world,
because this day, Good Friday, this day of death:
this is the day that the world has made,
and in revealing that, in showing it up,
what happened on the cross passed judgment on the world,
and condemned it.

On this day, the religious leaders stood condemned,
for their inability to recognise the kingdom of God.

On this day, Pilate stood condemned,
for his choice of expediency over truth.

On this day, the system Pilate represented stood condemned,
in its habitual use of violence to maintain order.

On this day, the crowd that called for Jesus' crucifixion
stood condemned,
for the ease with which they turned to scapegoating.

On this day, Peter, the chief of the disciples, stood condemned,
for betraying his friend to save his own skin.

On this day, the disciples as a group stood condemned,
for fleeing from the one they had promised to follow.

In what happened to Jesus,
in the mark that their action and their inaction,
their plans and their responses, left on this clean surface,
the state of all of their hearts was laid bare,
the truth about them was revealed.

They were judged and found wanting.

* * *

But it is not just them.

What killed Jesus was not simply the actions
of a few specific people;

it was a whole system, a whole world,

built in a way that had no real space for him.

And that world was made, that world was sustained,
by everyone who participated in it –

by those who actively maintained it, yes,

but also by those who simply let it carry on

(because we know that all that is necessary for evil to triumph
is for people of good will to do nothing to stop it).

And the world that condemned and executed Jesus
is *our* world too,

a world that we have inherited,

a world that we inhabit,

and a world that we, too, maintain and pass on.

Our world is a world that does not let innocence live;

our world is a world that can't find space for love;

our world is a world that runs on scapegoating;
our world is a world that generates betrayal;
our world is a world where expediency triumphs over truth.

Our whole world is revealed by the cross for what it is.

In the marks that it leaves on Jesus' clean flesh,
it is revealed in its lovelessness,
and so in its godlessness;
it is revealed, we might say, as *godforsaken*,
as running by rules that have nothing to do with God,
the rules of self-preservation, the rules of exclusion,
the rules of violence, the rules of death.

What happened to Jesus did not just reveal
the devices and desires of those who were there;
it revealed the whole world, *our* world, for what it is.

It is as if the crossbeam on which Jesus was hung
were the balance beam of the scales of justice,
and although his body was the weight that hung there,
these are scales in which *we* are being weighed –
weighed, and found wanting.

Looking at the cross –
at the injustice of it, the waste of it, the horror of it –
we can say, on this day, this Good Friday,
that this is the day that *our* world has made,
that this is the day that *we* have made.
Because, on this day, the whitewash is peeled away,
and what lies underneath is revealed.

This *is* the Day of Judgment,
the great and terrible Day of the Lord.

* * *

But. Still more is shown to us than that.
Something still deeper is revealed.
Because where in this picture that I have been uncovering
does the one who is our judge appear?
Despite the height of the cross,
he's not suspended above our world,
looking down on it from outside;

he's not sat on some celestial judge's bench,
with the world below him, sitting in the dock.

He's *here*, right here.

He is right in the midst of this world that we have made.

He is with us in the mess of this world that we have made.

He is here in the godforsaken brokenness
of this world that we have made.

He is here in the thick of things,
experiencing the harm that we have wrought,
and refusing to run away from it or evade it,
refusing to hide from it,
refusing to hold himself aloof from it.

His presence, and the manner of it, testify to the truth:

This is your world, he says; look what you have made of it –

but – I am with you in the midst of it,

whatever you do to me, however you react to me,

I am here with you, suffering this world alongside you,

here to speak to you about the love of God,
here to *show* you the love of God,
here to invite you *into* the love of God,
even on this day that your world has made,
even on this day that shows your world up for what it is.

Because, he says,
I did not come into the world to condemn the world,
but to gather it to myself –
and so I am here, with you all, in the depths,
the depths that by your action and your inaction,
by the devices and desires of your hearts,
you have made.

We might think, when we see what happens on the cross,
and what goes on happening on all the crosses that we make,
that our world *is* godforsaken.

We might think that we have, all too successfully,
pushed God out of it,

by making a world that runs counter to God's love,
a world that ignores God's love,
a world in which God's love is of no account.
We might think that we have built a world without God,
and that God has left us to it.

But on *this* day,
this Good Friday, this Day of Judgment,
this great and terrible Day of the Lord,
we are shown to be wrong about that, too –
wrong because our saviour is *here*,
alongside us, beside us, right in our midst,
hanging *with* us on the crosses that we have made for ourselves.

We *have* forsaken God, but God has *not* forsaken us.
And what that makes possible,
what possibility of future life that reveals for us –
well, that is a story for a different day,
and today is not the day for speaking about it;
that's a story not for a Friday but for a Sunday.

Amen