

Sermon for 28th February Holmbury St Mary

Texts: Psalm 22:23-end, Mark 8: 31-end

As we all know the one certainty in life is death, but the manner and timing of that death is something even the most prescient amongst us cannot foresee. I'm sure we would all think it wonderful if we could slip peacefully away surrounded by our loved ones in our own home. But of course, this is not always possible and indeed I have known some people who having made their earthly good-byes have deliberately chosen to die privately committing themselves trustingly and without fear into the arms of the eternal God. Watching someone pass from our longing into God's care is a very privileged time and there can be a wonderful sense both of peace and of sanctity as that moment of death occurs. But, however it happens as I've emphasised we cannot possibly know the manner or the time but have to trust implicitly in our Christian belief articulated so beautifully by Mother Teresa that 'death is nothing else but the going home to God'. By contrast to our own lack of knowledge Jesus knew exactly what lay ahead of him as he walked on that long last journey to Jerusalem. Our gospel reading today spells it out in detail. He will undergo great suffering and here we recognize that this anguish will be both physical and mental; he will be brutally and callously rejected by the religious elite and leaders of Jewish society and ultimately, he will be killed. Killed in one of the cruellest ways ever to be devised by man. Killed specifically on the day when the Passover lambs were sacrificially slaughtered in order that the people of Israel might be saved from slavery in Egypt so that now it is the sacrificial blood of Christ which will save not just the Israelites but all God's children from the slavery of sin. Jesus was fully cognizant of all that lay ahead of him; all that he must endure if he was to fulfil God's purposes.

And I believe that in Lent we are called to make this journey with him or as it says in our gospel reading take up our crosses and follow with him to Jerusalem and witness all that happens there before continuing onto Golgotha and standing with the women at the foot of his instrument of torture. No, it will not be an easy journey, and nor should it be, and here it is interesting to note how few people now choose to attend Good Friday services with all their harrowing sorrow preferring to jump straight to the joy of Easter Morning. Peter wanted the journey to be very different in nature but to fulfil God's purposes there was only one and one very specific way it could be and we like Peter must be prepared to accept that and not try to pretend that there is some easier way.

I believe that we are called to make this journey along with Peter and the other disciples and, as we do so, come to recognize how it is that we too have played our part in Christ's suffering, his

rejection and his death. How often have we like the disciples failed Jesus at crucial moments either by allowing ourselves to absent ourselves from his needs seen in other people or even to turn our backs and run away in fearful protection of our own safety? How often have our prejudices and our traditions shaped our obstinately held practices of our carefully constructed religion so that we fail to recognize the wonder and the mystery of the truth of what Jesus came to teach us and to show us exactly what God's loving purposes are for us? How often have we wounded him with our barbed comments, spiteful words and thoughtlessly cutting remarks that we have inflicted on others? How often have we hammered in the nails of deeply embedded unarticulated resentment, of hatred even, and of unexplored, unenlightened ignorance into his frail flesh?

Walking this journey will be hard as we learn to be as honest as we can be with ourselves and acknowledging that this is not merely a historical journey but one that happens again and again but most especially in every season of Lent. Can we this Lent learn to be completely honest with ourselves, to face up to the truth of the part we play in Christ's passion? We are told again and again that he died for us and if we are ever to begin to understand the reasons why he made this supreme sacrifice we surely have to explore what it was in us, in you and in me, what are the faults, the sins, the failings that have contributed to the essential need for God to offer up his own Son for us.; to make him the unique sacrificial lamb who could lead us from the slavery of sin.

Samuel Wells writes as follows: 'This is God-constantly vulnerable to human rejection, embodying agonizing love, and yet never letting that suffering have the last word. there is only the breaking through of wondrous love amid the scars and hurts of painful conflict.....Christians believe because they are drawn into the mystery of Christ's passion, death and resurrection, and find in that story all the truth they can imagine about who God is and who they are.'

Can we make this journey and discover at the end of it that both the scars we have inflicted upon the body of Christ and the scars that others have inflicted upon us have been acknowledged and confessed as sins which need so desperately to be forgiven and healed through the immeasurable grace and mercy of the wondrous love that God has revealed for us in this last earthly journey of our Lord Jesus Christ? The word atonement is often used in relation to Christ's sacrificial death a word which can become the three words 'at-one-ment'. In facing up to the part we have played in Christ's death and by allowing his healing love to redeem us from the slavery and separation that sin inflicts upon us we can experience the amazing blessing of healing when we are restored to being at-one with Him.

No, neither the manner of our own death nor its timing can ever be known with any certainty but to make this journey with Christ will surely help in making us ever more fully alive to that wondrous love.