Passion Sunday Sermon 2021 by Revd Graham Earney

Readings: Jeremiah 31.31-34; John 12.20-33

Each of us looks at the world in a different way. Each of us has a different set of criteria by which we look at, and assess, the lives we lead. Some are naturally optimistic; others take a more pessimistic view of a similar set of circumstances.

During the past few weeks and months I have been looking at the ways I assess the world in which I reside – as with many of you it has been a rather restricted world of late! As restrictions begin to ease a week or so from now, we shall have to be careful about how we use and respect re-found freedoms. Those who talk about going forward into a new ‘normal’ are being prophetic. We should not be going back to the old selfishness and greed of the recent past. We should be looking for greater equality of opportunity and resources, rather more imaginatively than the government would seem to be. We should be doing this for the disadvantaged within our nation, and for all those even more disadvantaged by climate change, oppression and violence across the world.

But to get back, for a moment, to how we look at the world around us. Are you one of those who sees the world as a set of contrasts? The hallmarks that set one thing off against another. Black and white – light and shade – young and old – fast and slow – traditional or modern – pre-Covid19 and post the advent of Covid - to name just a few. Things which define themselves by not being something else. This would be the view of St John in his gospel, for instance in the story of Nicodemus.

Or do you see the world through a set of complementary things. In the words of the old song, “love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage” (and that even pre-dates me!). To a railway enthusiast like me the combined smell of steam and smoke mean that it must be a ‘living’ steam engine! Do you look at the world in terms of things which add value to one another? Do you seek to add your efforts to those of others so that a greater whole is created? That was one of the foundation principles of our diocesan Local Ministry Plan, which put together the complementary skills of clergy and lay people.

On this 5th Sunday of Lent we enter Passiontide – the period leading up to Good Friday and Easter. We are presented with two readings which have an element of thinking about something which defines our world. It is the concept of time – is it with us or against us? – a question which we may answer differently at differing stages of our life! Each thinks of time in terms of past, present and future – what has happened, what is happening, and what might be hoped for in the future.

Jeremiah looked back to past covenants with God, which the people had broken and were still breaking. He points the people forward to a new age in which there will be a new covenant with God. Not a covenant carved in tablets of stone, which can be broken. It will be a covenant written on the hearts of the people. Recognition of it will herald in a time when all, the least and the greatest, will know the Lord and the Lord will remember their sin no more. This is not a reworking of an old covenant – this is a completely new covenant.

When I preached before Lent, I suggested that people might like to read John’s gospel as part of their Lenten discipline. Sandra and I have been doing that guided by the Burridge commentary from which I had quoted. The author has made the point, previously lost to me, that Andrew is portrayed in John as the great introducer. In chapter 1 he introduces Simon Peter to Jesus. He is the one who introduces the boy with 5 loaves and 2 small fishes to Jesus, which enable the feeding of the 5000. Here, in today’s reading it is Andrew who introduces the Greeks, who had come to Philip, saying they wished to see Jesus. This enables Jesus to use the metaphor of the seed corn needing to fall into the ground and appear to die for new life to begin. Jesus goes on to state clearly what is going to happen in the near future. Conflict and the threat of crucifixion has brought him to this time. It is soon to be the time when he is lifted up on the cross to draw all people to himself. To redeem humankind, to reclaim them for God. To bring them back into unity with God as foretold in the prophecy of Jeremiah.

These readings talk about time – about the things which have happened and the times yet to be. In English we really have just the one word for time. But in Greek there were two distinct concepts of time. There was *Chronos* – which we might call linear time – from which we get words like chronometer. But there was also *Kairos* – which can be best translated as ‘God’s Time’. The ability to see things working within eternity, rather than counting the minutes as they tick by on the clock.

A decade ago when I used to inhabit a bed in 26U at RSH rather frequently I was tended by a nurse who was clearly a devout man of faith. One day I saw that he was clearly agitated. He had given a drug to the patient next to me and he realised it hadn’t worked in the time expected. The nurse said to me, “why doesn’t God make the drug work?” It may seem oblique, but my response was to talk about *Chronos* and *Kairos* – that each of us is different and sometimes we need to look in a longer timeframe. It seemed to help him, but even I was relieved when, sometime later, the patient was clearly getting better!

The concept of Kairos – God’s time – is more than just a change of timescale. It is also a change in the way we see God’s world around us. It carries a sense of when we know God to be close to us. It is conveyed in the Celtic Spirituality of ‘thin places’ –places in which we have a tangible sense that God has come close to us. For me, the stories of Jacob, Moses, Elijah and Elisha – to name just a few – show this in scripture. In our own time the isles of Iona and Lindisfarne have that effect on us. Are you looking out for a ‘thin place’ – somewhere or something in which you can feel the presence of God to be especially close? As we walk with Jesus the way of the Cross, may we sense God close to us in the present.

If the nature of time is one in which we see differing views, another is the nature of the world. Some see a great contrast between sacred and secular views of the world. It is a distinction with which I have never felt at ease. We say Almighty God, it is ‘God’s world’, and ‘God is everywhere – even being with people in suffering’, with alacrity. And then we talk about ‘the secular world’ offset from the Church, as if it was somewhere that God wasn’t. It is a circle I can’t square! A question for you to ponder in the days ahead – is a group with one disciple of Christ in it a secular group or a sacred one?

The question is even more poignant when groups which might be deemed to show similar outcomes are described as ‘sacred’ or ‘secular’. Such a complementing came together this weekend over the colour Red. Red is the colour of the Passion – Christ’s blood shed for us for our salvation. Red is also the colour of Comic Relief’s logo – the Red Nose – whose bi-annual fund raising event was on Friday. It is an organisation which does so much to alleviate the suffering of disadvantaged children and deprived communities throughout this country and Africa. Rather than see them as competing with the churches to help the poorest in the world we should see them as being a means by which the Kingdom of God is shown in the world around us. This weekend the Red of Passion meets the Red Nose of compassion. My faith is what sustains me, but it also is that which allows me to see others as allies in living out God’s Kingdom.

So how do we look at God’s world? God sent his Son, Jesus, not to save the church, but to save the world. Jesus spread his arms wide on the Cross to draw all people to himself, for God’s saving love is for all in the world. So let us put away the sin of dualism – that of contrasting ourselves to others, lest we think of ourselves as better than them. Let us take up the virtue of enhancing complementation. To try to be more like the three persons of the Trinity, existing in harmony and unity. Thereby being encouraged to offer a greater showing of God’s love towards all creation. There is no better time to start than in this Passiontide and Easter – so let’s see how we can combine together despite the restrictions of the age to show God’s love in action to all.

Revd Graham Earney

21st March 2021