

Dean's Letter, 7 April 2019

Dear Cathedral family, brothers and sisters in Christ

The 5th Sunday in Lent (today) is traditionally known as Passion Sunday. Today is the start of Passiontide – the last two weeks of Lent, the season of the Passion. The word “passion” is a powerful one: it can refer to strong emotion, an outburst of anger, sexual love, or enthusiasm. But the word is based on the Latin word which means “to suffer”. It is this meaning which we focus on during Passiontide: the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. During these two weeks we are taken to the heights of affirmation and success and recognition, followed by disaster, betrayal, suffering and death: the triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday; the growing sense of crisis and looming disaster during Holy Week; the Maundy Thursday events of the Last Supper, the foot washing, the final prayers for his disciples (John 17); the prayers of agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, the betrayal by Judas, the mockery of a trial before Pilate; and then the painful Good Friday road of suffering and humiliation, the procession to Calvary and the place of the cross, the final suffering and death of Christ.

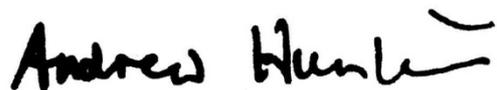
It is a strange mixture of contradictions: in human terms, everything went wrong. Whatever might have been in the minds of the disciples on Palm Sunday – perhaps a take-over of Jerusalem? A spontaneous uprising? A change of religious leadership, with Jesus as the new high priest? We don't really know what they were thinking or hoping for. But whatever it was, as they say, it all went pear-shaped when Jesus was arrested and sentenced to death. Their hopes and dreams ended on the cross.

But in the eyes of the Gospel writers, the suffering and death of Jesus was no accident, but rather the unfolding of God's design and plan for the salvation of all. This is particularly clear in the Gospel of St John, for whom the death of Christ was the pre-destined “hour” (kairos). In John's Gospel, the final cry of Jesus on the cross was “It is finished!” “It is accomplished!” “I have done what the Father sent me to do!” It was a cry of victory, not of defeat.

In our Gospel reading for today (John 12:1-8), Mary anoints Jesus' feet with costly perfume, and wipes them with her hair. There is a possible parallel with the unnamed woman who does the same (Luke 7:36-50), in gratitude and humility, an act of sorrow and repentance and love. Mary's anointing of Jesus has many of those elements, but is also more than this. Jesus understands what she is doing. She knows, somehow, what others do not, but of which Jesus is aware: that he is heading to his death. And her act of love, done in silence, is seen as a tangible prophecy that Jesus is to die.

So we are confronted, in stark and clear terms, with the death of Jesus, and also, in the weeks ahead, with its meaning. Christ is our High Priest, who enters the Holy Place with his own blood to obtain eternal redemption (Heb 9:11-15). He is the Suffering Servant who “was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities” (Isaiah 53:4-5). His death becomes the ultimate sign of love and hope for us all.

My love to you all

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrew Hunt". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.