

Friday 10th April 2020 Livestreamed from the Deanery, Grahamstown 12 noon		Good Friday 2020 During the COVID19 lockdown
Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12	Ps 22	Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9 John 18:1 - 19:42
The death of Christ		

“After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scriptures), ‘I am thirsty.’ A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, ‘It is finished.’ Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.”
(Jn 19:28-30)

We gather together on this Good Friday at a unique time in our lives, in the middle of the COVID19 lock down, a Holy Week like none other. As I said last night at our Maundy Thursday Eucharist, these sacred days are normally marked by wonderful acts of worship when we meet together in one place, to hear the word of God read and preached, and to celebrate the Eucharist. Instead, we are in our various homes, and instead of being in the Cathedral, Claire and I are in the Cory Room, in front of my phone, and the Cathedral Facebook page is our platform! What a time this is!

GOOD FRIDAY

During this past week, Holy Week, one thing has struck me again and again. Often the underlying theme during Holy Week is that we are watching with Christ as he goes through these dark days. The Stations of the Cross, at the cross itself, we watch, in adoration and love and gratitude for all that he suffers. We know that he is doing this *for us* – so that we may be saved, set free from sin and evil and death. And at the end of it all on Easter Day, we find the empty tomb, and we know that Jesus is risen indeed.

But this week has been different. Instead of us watching Jesus walk the way of the cross, it is we who are walking this hard road to Calvary. As the nature and size of the crisis becomes clearer, it is we who are washing one another's feet. It is we who are carrying the cross. And at Calvary it is we who are on the cross, suffering, struggling, dying. And as the lock down continues, we shall face an extended time of Lent, an extended Holy Week, and extended Good Friday. The resurrection is in the distant future. This is our Good Friday time.

Our readings are of the suffering servant (Isaiah); lament (Ps 31); Christ our great high priest who has been tested as we are, who became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (Hebrews); the Passion from John's Gospel. The focus is on the suffering and death of Christ. Out of this, I highlight three aspects:

1. God *with* us in our suffering

Over these six hours, as Jesus hangs on the cross, and over the centuries as the Church has reflected on the profound significance and meaning of the suffering and death of Christ, one thing is repeated: that Christ suffers with all who suffer. Christ identifies with the agony and pain, the desolation and despair, that you and I experience. Christ identifies with the human experience. The prisons. The concentration camps. The Nazi extermination camps. The places of torture. And the quiet hidden wretched misery of the abused, the oppressed, the downtrodden. He enters into the misery and wretchedness of the world, and becomes part of it.

It is easy to trust in the faithfulness and love of God when all is going well. We tend to thank God for blessing us when we are healthy, when we have comfort, food and shelter. But when our lives fall apart, we think that God has turned his back on us; that we have disobeyed God and this is his judgement and punishment. During this time of COVID, there has been that sort of language.

Now it is true that sickness and suffering can open our hearts to the voice of God, calling us back to him. Our Prayer Book, in the section *Considerations for the Sick*, has this to say to us:

“All illness, whether mild or serious, reminds us to give

thought to our relationship with God, and to make no delay in seeking reconciliation with those from whom we may be estranged. Our Lord himself... was made perfect through suffering, and we are to regard all sickness as an opportunity for spiritual growth.”¹

Certainly, judging by what I see and read on social media, and from personal contacts, there has been an outpouring of prayer these past days, as people have turned to God in wholehearted worship and intercession. As many of you know, we have been livestreaming regular daily acts of worship since the start of the lockdown. It has helped me to pray. I feel the better for it. It has brought us back to basics, back to what is most important in our lives.

But within days of the lockdown, many have become aware of just how fragile our economy is; how many people depend not on regular monthly salaries or stipends, but on what they are able to glean and pick up on the way. With lockdown, many are sitting with no income, no food. And so there is also suffering and great need at every corner. The impact of an extended lockdown is going to hit us all.

The cross of Christ says that Christ is with the vulnerable, the helpless, those on the margins. He is with the powerless, the helpless. Children in hungry households. Women being abused by partners. Those with nothing in the cupboard for tomorrow. Christ is there.

¹ *AAPB*, pg 494

And we need to be there also. In words often quoted, Theresa of Ávila said:

“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”²

In the days ahead, Christ is with us in our suffering and hardship. And we are called to be the presence of Christ with all who suffer. We salute the decision by President Cyril Ramaphosa and members of Cabinet to donate a third of their monthly salaries to the Solidarity Fund. I thank the many who have donated to the Cathedral food voucher and the Food4Futures food parcel feeding schemes over the past week. Groups of people are collecting money and packing food parcels. And tomorrow, Holy Saturday, Colin and Sally Price-Smith are running the Two Oceans Half Marathon (21 kms) and Ultra (56 kms) in the confines of their garden, to raise funds for the needy. Thank you, Colin and Sally!

² <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/66880-christ-has-no-body-now-but-yours-no-hands-no> accessed 10th April 2020 5

2. God *for* us in suffering

The suffering servant from Isaiah says it: he suffered for us. He died in our place. He is the sacrificial lamb, the one who was slain, killed for us. He is the ram caught in a bush that was given by God to Abraham to offer up instead of his son Isaac, on Mount Moriah (Genesis 22). He is the one who took the burden of our sin upon himself; he is the one who experienced the utter desolation of the absence of God, in his great cry of despair from the cross – “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Matthew 27:46)” St Paul to the church in Rome: “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

His death sets us free so that we may receive new life. His suffering is our salvation. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). The cross of Christ is the eternal symbol, reminder and reality of God’s love for us, for the whole world, down the ages. We are redeemed – slaves now set free – by the ransom, the offering, that Jesus paid. When Jesus died, the curtain in the temple was torn from top to bottom. The barrier between humankind and God has been torn down. We cannot earn our place in the kingdom of heaven, and we do not need to earn it. We are simply invited to accept it and receive it as a gift.

3. God *in* us in our suffering

St Paul writes: “I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Colossians 1:24).

Strange words and often discussed. Does that mean that the cross of Christ did not do it all? That the cross does not represent the finished work of Christ? By no means. I understand this verse to say that when we share in the sufferings of Christ, Christ suffers in us and through us. Or, as St Augustine says (in paraphrase): the Passion of Christ is continued as we unite our sufferings to Jesus³. God is in us in our suffering.

AND SO...

With the extension of the Covid lockdown until the end of April, we are facing tough times. Some say that this is a Kairos moment for the church, when we rediscover and redefine what we are all about, what is our core business, why we are here. Certainly, we are all facing a time of testing. Our compassion and our faith is under the spotlight, both in the public arena and also in our own hearts. We are all having to sharpen and redefine what it

³ <https://www.catholic.com/qa/how-can-christs-sufferings-lack-anything> accessed 10th April 2020

means to trust and hope in the midst of despair and desolation.

These weeks are our calvary, our crucifixion, our long drawn out Holy Week. Mary will anoint the feet of Jesus. Perhaps it will be our feet, and perhaps we will anoint the feet of others. Judas will do his work of betrayal. Jesus will continue his agony of prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. The hard times will continue.

But this will end. Good Friday will give way to the empty tomb of Easter. The virus will be defeated. And we shall go out of this lockdown into life again.

CONCLUSION

The cross of Christ changed things for ever. My prayer is that this time of lockdown, our calvary, will change us all, will transform for the good our families; our communities, our country.

We adore you, Christ, and we bless you, because by your holy Cross you have redeemed the world.

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Dean of Grahamstown
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