

Monday 6th April 2020

MONDAY IN HOLY WEEK

Benefice of Garsington, Cuddesdon & Horspath

Isaiah 42. 1-9. John 12. 1-11

The experience of Jesus through his passion – especially through the events of Thursday night and Friday of this week – is one of abandonment and deprivation. Piece by piece all that is familiar and comforting is stripped away from him.

First his friends and companions – the one who betrayed and the one who denied, the ones who slept and the ones who ran away, the women who ‘stood afar off’ – all these abandoned him. Were stripped away.

Soon after, in quick and bewildering succession, Jesus is deprived of liberty, of dignity, of his clothing and all respect, of his safety and comfort, until it is his life itself that is stripped away from him. And, at that moment, and most shockingly of all, he senses himself to be abandoned even by his God.

‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’

Abandonment and deprivation. A relentless stripping away.

*

The way we do liturgy in this week – or the way we do liturgy traditionally this week – reflects something of this stripping away. The words, the ceremonial, the ornaments are ruthlessly pared back. They become plainer, fewer, more spare. Bleaker.

By tradition on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday there are no greetings or blessings to start or end worship. Those who pray the Offices do so with maximum simplicity: the glorias and antiphons with which we customarily embellish and decorate the psalms and canticles are dropped. Less is more.

And in the end is silence, as priest and people depart from the cross at the end of the liturgy of Good Friday – a silence maintained through Holy Saturday, when no Eucharist or other sacrament can be celebrated for the Christ is dead. Silent in the tomb.

*

This year all of this is all the more palpable, all the more real, all the more stark. It began, of course – this stripping away and gathering silence – before Holy Week and, devastatingly, will continue beyond. This will be the year of the long Easter Eve, of waiting in the cold for hope to come. At least that is how it will feel for us, for the faithful. The long Holy Saturday. Waiting in silence, our Churches empty, the sacraments uncelebrated, unparticipated in – or so, for many, it will feel.

My God, my God... God-forsaken.

*

This – agonising as it is, almost unsayable – is what we have been given this Holy Week and this Easter. Like no other, maybe, this will be the year in which to get really close in heart and mind and spirit to Jesus abandoned and deprived. God-forsaken.

*

Isaiah's 'suffering servant', the subject of this evening's Old Testament reading, has become a hugely influential figure in the way Christians have reflected on Jesus and Jesus' achievement on the cross and through this week. We heard just now how he was the one 'not [to] grow faint or be crushed' and this, too, is something we need to hear and take away.

It is precisely when Christ cries out 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me' that he is closest to us in the depths of our despair. It is when we want to cry out the same – that God has abandoned us and all hope has gone – that we are, paradoxical though this is, are closest to him in Christ the Crucified One. The one 'not[to] grow faint or be crushed'.

*

Of course it will not feel as tidy as this, or as easy. Golgotha darkness is real darkness and the Tomb is also dark, and cold. It is the darkness of these days and of our times.

In the *midst* of it – in the darkness and in the cold, abandoned and forsaken, naked, deprived and alone – *here* is Christ our God. Our hope and our salvation. Amen.