

The Places of the Passion.

1. The Golden Gate

The great Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, once wrote that 'Christianity is the most materialistic of all religions'. He was reminding us that our faith is not a fairy-tale: it does not inhabit some mystical realm. It is an understanding of life and the world that is firmly fixed in the everyday things that you and I experience. Our faith is to be found in what Johnny Cash once lyrically sang as 'the mud, the blood and the beer'. Our faith is in the Incarnation. And so, we find that the primary source of our faith-the Bible- whilst having much in it that is mythical, symbolic, apocryphal and poetic, is located in the realities of this world and this life. Alongside visionary and comforting poetry we also read of harrowing scenes of human cruelty. Jesus is fixed to a cross of wood. Although mythical, our understanding of the meaning of creation is located in a garden and that basic human sense that things are not quite right-that we are not quite right-is explained in those two things that characterise the reality of human existence-the pain of childbirth and the need to work and to toil. And so, we come to the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ. It didn't happen in an imaginary realm or as part of a heavenly epic: it took place under the glaring sun of a dusty city, Jerusalem, surrounded by the everyday business of a city: the shopkeepers, the visits to the Temple, the coping with the Romans, a foreign invader, the crucifixions...

Over the next four nights, I want to explore with you some of the places where the events of Holy Week took place. Why are we told that these events took place in these particular places made of wood and stone and mortar? For, the Bible accounts take us deeper into the reality of this life and this place we are given to live in, and it also true that the scriptures are very economic accounts of the stories-not one jot or tittle is unnecessary, every word is weighed, all has meaning. So come with me as we journey with Christ into the city he knew and the places where real things happened to him.

The great mystic and visionary William Blake spoke of seeing old and familiar things in new ways as 'opening the doors of perception'...

If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up 'til he sees all things through chinks of his cavern.

This Holy Week begins with Jesus coming, quite deliberately, to Jerusalem and we are told that he is accompanied by an ecstatic crowd waving palm fronds and laying down their coats. He would have entered the City by a grand entrance we know as the Golden Gate. Built as a defence against attack on the city of Jerusalem and holy Temple sanctuary within, in Christ it is to become the gateway into the light and life of Our Lord's Passion.

The edifice we see today was probably built on the foundations of the original one that Jesus would have known, and it was of great importance in the Jewish faith-as indeed was and is the whole city of Jerusalem. Zion, the mountain on which it was built, was symbolic to the Jewish people of the land that they had been given after their rootless and landless wanderings in the wilderness. It was the heart of the Promised Land. In Jewish hearts and minds their existence as a people was inextricably bound up with the land they lived in. And at the centre of the City was the Temple-the place where the presence of Yahweh their God was most to be experienced-the Holy of Holies. The Golden Gate-or Sushan Gate (which must have been the one that Jesus used to enter the city)-was meant to be used by the High Priest alone when, each year, he brought out the two sacrificial goats, or 'scapegoats': one to be sacrificed in the Temple for the sins of the nation, the other to be banished to the wilderness.

Already, the significance is building: Jesus, the Lamb of God, enters through the sacrificial gate to prepare for his own sacrifice.

As a result, the gate became the place through which the Jews believed the Messiah-that promised warlike and yet spiritual leader-would come to inherit and save his kingdom and rule over its people. In the time of Jesus this hope was particularly important because the land had been invaded and subdued by the Romans.

By entering through the Golden Gate, we get the hint that Jesus is the Messiah. His mission, not one of war or political and religious power, but of humility, love and self-giving. The scapegoat and the Messiah.

But that is not all: for the gate also came to be seen by the Jewish people, opening up, as it did, from the secular, commercial world of the lucrative trade of the olive and oil industry on the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley, where the dead were buried, to the divine, new life of the Temple. Scapegoat; Messiah; and the path he was travelling was the path from the many deaths the of this life to the life eternal.

The power of all this would not be lost on those who accompanied Jesus on that day, it would not be lost to those who later heard of his actions and understood the voiceless message he was sending. The events of Holy Week, and what is to come, were to become the fulcrum on which the life of the world would turn and they would, and they will, speak of how we should live our lives to the good and how the world could become the Kingdom of God. The events of Holy Week demand that we open our senses and our hearts to see things in a different way, to turn things on their head: to see things as God sees them and not as humanity sees them. As we enter the city with Jesus, we will have our eyes opened to see and experience the real state of the human condition hidden under a thin veil of respectability and order, and how at odds it can be with the divine life when confronted by Jesus. Bishop Joh Spong wrote...

In Jesus, the values born in our quest for security, values that so deeply shaped human religion, were reversed.

So, as we journey along this Holy Week we will see superficial idol-worship become mob rule; we will see a den of avarice and greed and worldly power masquerade as a holy place and the presence of God; we will encounter betrayal by those who swear allegiance and faithfulness and denial by those who declare undying love. We will hear those in authority in the city and land acting out of fear of losing their power and position but call it strong leadership. We will witness the state murder of an individual hearing that it is the people's will. We will see beauty and truth and hope pinned to a cross. Everything that is holy, subdued and overwhelmed by sinful man and we will be assured that it is for the security of the state and its people. We will witness all the contortions of truth and spiritual failings in this week: contortions that have continued down through history even until this present day, and we will recognise in ourselves and in our hearts and in the world around us the same inability to perceive and live the truth.

A phrase from a sermon by the Dean of my college when I was at university has stayed with me all my life. He said...

Who is the typical man? The star footballer? The pop star? The champion boxer? The Millionaire? No, the typical man is broken man on the cross.

We are often inclined to believe that the Passion of Christ was a unique and one-off event, special because it happened to the Son of God. But the real hope in Christ's Passion is that it was experienced by a man just like you and me and that what happened to this flesh and blood human being isn't unique but has happened throughout history and is happening today. The Passion of Christ opens a gateway to the divine way through the mess.

After 9/11, a famous photo emerged of Fr Mychal Judge being carried by firemen from the carnage of the twin towers. He was one of the first victims of the attack. The photo has come to be regarded as a modern-day pieta-the famous sculpture by Michelangelo in which Mary cradles Christ's lifeless body brought down from the cross. Speaking of his reaction to this Passion story and the sacrifice of the firefighters, Bruce Springsteen writes...

Yet what they left behind was tangible. Death, along with anger, pain and loss, open a window (we might say door) of opportunity for the living. It removes the veil that 'the ordinary' gently drapes over our eyes. Renewed sight is the hero's last loving gift to those left behind.