

Lent 5  
Passion Sunday

I take as my text today, from St. Peter's 1st Epistle General:

***Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you:***

***But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.***

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

As last week, I look today to the New Testament lesson appointed for Morning Prayer to tie together the Epistle and Gospel appointed for Passion Sunday, and to give us a better understanding of the theme of sacrifice and suffering they represent.

While Passion Sunday has some medieval precedent, Passiontide itself is peculiar to Anglicanism, though in recent decades it has crept into Roman Catholicism.

Passion recalls the suffering that Jesus was to endure. Our Lord's Sacrifice is clearly addressed in today's Epistle from St. Paul to the Hebrews; yet, today's Gospel does not mention any such sacrifice or suffering except perhaps an allusion to it at the end of the passage to recount the moment when the Jewish leadership, so enraged, took up stones in the Temple to cast at Jesus; indeed they wanted to stone Him out of the Temple. But Jesus hid Himself from them.

In the passage from St. John's Gospel, which essentially jumps into the middle of a long argument, Jesus confronts the Jewish leaders directly, challenging them.

He asks them if there is anyone among them who can convict Him of sin. He further states, *If I tell you the truth, why don't you believe me?*

He is accused of having a devil in Him. Perhaps, the word, Samaritan, is a mistranslation of a very similar Aramaic word that means *child of the devil*.

The confrontation continues and the Jews become angrier until the final straw when Jesus says, *Before Abraham was, I am*.

Having not recognized Jesus as the Messiah, they certainly could not, would not tolerate blasphemy, and in their eyes, that is what Jesus had done: He had committed blasphemy by taking on the Name of God.

If He had said, *Before Abraham was, I was*, the argument might well have continued. But Jesus had committed the unthinkable and made Himself equal with God. Imagine, this man out of Galilee, this carpenter's son, being equal with God.

So infuriated, they took up stones with which to stone Him out of the Temple, if not to stone Him to death; but He hid Himself and left.

For this claim, He would suffer. He was a *marked man*.

Indeed, the stones would become iron nails, and the temple would be a cross on Calvary; and He would fulfill and bring to an end the sacrificial system of the Old Covenant by shedding His Blood for the sins of the world.

As we heard in St. Pau's Epistle to the Hebrews,

***CHRIST being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us.***

The sacrifices of the Old Covenant had to be repeated over and over; there was no end to them, and the shedding of blood.

But, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ was ***once for all***. He poured out His Blood on the Cross in a sacrificial act that had an eternal effect never to be repeated, an eternal mediation offered in heaven, to which we are enjoined through the Eucharistic Feast on earth.

We are further enjoined through our own human sacrifice and suffering when we are persecuted for our faith in Jesus Christ.

St. Peter, in his First Epistle General, brings to light that in our own suffering, we share in the suffering of Jesus Christ.

Writing in a foreboding time, when persecution seemed inevitable, he takes the position that persecution is a test: a test of our faith, and a test of our willingness to suffer for our faith.

In the world, the Christian is like a lightning rod; he attracts persecution by his very behavior, his unwillingness to compromise, and by being a conscience to the society in which he lives; by a cheerful demeanor; and by a certain glow.

As Christians do stand apart, they will be tested, and if they have to suffer for Christ, they must do so in a manner that will never bring discredit.

St. Peter says,

***But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters.***

***Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.***

More to the point, Peter is instructing us in how to lead our lives by never taking an interest in things that are alien to the life of a Christian.

In all, and through all, we must entrust ourselves to God who will never fail us.

Thus, as we Christians suffer for our faith, so we are joined to Christ's sufferings, sharing in His Passion, redeemed by a once offered sacrifice which we share in the Eucharistic Feast.

When we take up our cross and follow Jesus Christ, His Passion becomes our passion, a commitment that is not without cost. But that cost is worldly and temporal, while the promise fulfilled in Christ is spiritual and eternal.

Indeed, as Christians, we are strangers in a strange land, aliens so to speak, a state brought about by our rebirth in Christ through baptism when we were indelibly marked as a child of God and set apart from the world.

Little has changed since the Passion of Christ. We Christians are never out of the crosshairs of Satan; we continue to be challenged for our faith on every front.

Yet, we must never cease to be examples for the world. Through our actions, our words and deeds; through our demeanor and behaviour; through our love of family, neighbor, and country, of all of God's Creation; and through our unashamed acknowledgment and worship of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, we demonstrate to the world the unfathomable power and love of God and the hope of eternal life.

As Christians we become essentially weapons in the fight against Satan, sin, and all that is worldly.

When we take on the full armor of God, we become formidable weapons against evil.

Certainly, in this world, as Christians, we find ourselves in a spiritual struggle. But we can be confident in our struggle knowing that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. Nothing. Not tribulation, distress, persecution, nor, in the words of St. Paul, "famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword.....neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Finally, St. Peter, in his Epistle, exhorts us to entrust our lives to God. God will not fail us, and while we put our trust in him, endeavor to do what is right and just in his sight, we become examples to the world of the love of God expressed through his Son, our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.