

Sermon Passion Sunday 2006

Today's gospel is the heart of the crisis. We enter on the holiest two weeks of the Christian Year. The Last Supper, the Betrayal, the Arrest, Show-trial and Crucifixion of Our Lord. And it begins with this dramatic confrontation with his enemies. Well, some of the words of Jesus require careful study and analysis: they might be susceptible of more than one interpretation. But the words he speaks in today's gospel are as clear as a smack in the face:

Your Father Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it and was glad. Verily, verily I say unto you, before Abraham was I am

Christ's words are even more explicit – if that is possible – in the language used by the gospel. In Greek there is one way of saying *I am* and it is *Ego*. And there is another way *Eimi*. Jesus uses both expressions: *Ego Eimi*. You can't say plainer than that. Actually yes you can. For of course the words *I am* are the sacred name of God revealed to Moses at the burning bush. So holy is this name that it was always ever spoken once a year – on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement by the High Priest, in the temple in the holy of holies.

So Jesus here claims to be the Eternal God, the hope of Abraham. This puts us straight utterly as to who Jesus is and who he is not. And his words define the sort of response we must make to him. The gospel tells us he is not just a great teacher like Socrates or the prophet Isaiah. Jesus is the Everlasting God. So we are free to reject this as too tall a story.

You can call it a myth or a metaphor with shades of meaning so subtle they would escape even the forensic virtuosity of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Yes, we can reject Christ. If you decide his claim is ridiculous and impossible, then go ahead and reject him. But look what follows: you can't reject Christ as God *but* revere him as a great teacher and generally nice chap who went about doing good. He said he is God. A man who makes that claim is certainly not a great teacher. He is a deluded lunatic – or else he is who he says he is, God.

I have been calling us all through Lent to use these weeks to draw nearer to Jesus, to follow him and to learn to love him. And it is crucial that we all understand the nature of the Christ we are trying to follow and love. We are being asked to turn to him as God, the Second Person of the Trinity striding the hills of Galilee and going up to Jerusalem to die for us.

But there's another thing we must not forget. Jesus is God *and* Man. He is the supreme representative of our human nature. He is the manliest man there ever was. And it is this man in his flesh who suffers and dies for you.

His trade was sometime carpenter and country rabbi. You can picture him in the green fields above the Sea of Galilee – very much like English meadows, though 600 feet below sea level. And the names of the little towns are magical too: Magdala, Capernaum, Tiberias. But this country rabbi has another destiny and it is to go up to the great City of Jerusalem and die outside the City wall.

Jerusalem was the 900 years old City of David, the capital of Israel and Judah. It was a centre of pilgrimage for Jews from all over the Mediterranean. It was also the centre for sacrifice. And now comes Jesus who is to be the supreme sacrifice. In this last fortnight before the Crucifixion he teaches daily in the temple, he drives out the swindlers who overcharge for sacrificial pigeons and other religious Kitsch. One could hope for his return if only to visit some of our cathedrals. Can't you just hear it, *And behold he cast out them that slouched and sauntered through the cathedral and said, It is written my house shall be a house of prayer but ye have turned it into a jingle of mobile phones and the flash of digital cameras; and have defiled the sacred space with thy chewing gum.*

He is in the big City but still there is the countryman about Our Lord as he returns from the temple each evening to the house of Simon the Leper at the little village of Bethany, where Martha lived and Lazarus. Lazarus – that bears thinking about. And the walk from the temple to Bethany is about one and a half miles. You go from the temple mount, down the stone steps, past the house of the High Priest, across the brook Kidron and up a long hill that passes a garden called Gethsemane. In Gethsemane I have sat under the same olive trees that were there at the time of Christ. And from above Gethsemane you can look down over the whole City, the great temple, 1000 years of sacred history. And what would be in your heart as you looked down over Jerusalem? In Jesus' heart there was sorrow. And he wept.

Jesus is very God of very God. But in this scene of him weeping over the City you can see the very human person. I want us to follow him in these two most holy weeks. If you look on the back of today's Newsletter you will see the programme of devotions which we have arranged for Holy Week especially. I want us to fill St Michael's for these devotions. As a witness to our own City certainly, but more even than a witness, as a spiritual exercise for ourselves. You know what exercise does: it makes you fit. I want us in prime spiritual condition by the end of Holy Week, so we can come here to celebrate his Resurrection.

In these services we shall hear the story of his Cross and Passion. Remember all I've been saying to you throughout these Lent sermons about how we need imaginatively to enter the story in heart and mind until it takes us over, until we become a part of it. See him as he rides into Jerusalem and the deceitful adulation of the crowd. Draw near to him at the Last Supper and imagine that you are one of the disciples who sit at the table with him – as you are indeed when you approach the altar for the Sacrament which he inaugurated then.

Imagine you are halfway up the hill towards Bethany. You are in the Garden of Gethsemane among those same olive trees. It is night and he is alone in agony of spirit but sublimely resolute. And the Judas kiss. Be there in the High Priest's house and hear the Second Person of the Trinity accused of blasphemy. Stand with him before Pilate and hear Pilate, sophisticated, cynical, ask *What is truth?* And all the time Pilate is speaking, there is the Truth, the Way and the Life standing in silence before him.

Then the soldiers mocking and the gorgeous robe. The flogging within an inch of his life. The Way of the Cross past where the Roman soldiers played dice on the pavement. And Golgotha, the place of a skull. And there's a hill in the shape of a

skull. And you can still see it today. It was raw and banal then, not far from Gehenna, the Jerusalem rubbish tip from which the filthy smoke poured by day and night. And it is banal today too – for now it overlooks the Jerusalem bus station.

And finally there is darkness over the whole land from noon until three o'clock. Come to St Michael's on Good Friday and keep those three hours as a devotion at the foot of the Cross. And his terrible cry *Eli Eli lama sabbachthani? My God, why hast thou forsaken me?*

And know this: those terrible words are the beginning of Psalm twenty-two. And it goes on *They pierced my hands and my feet. I may tell all my bones. They stand staring and looking upon me.* Know that those words were written hundreds of years before the time of Jesus. And thereby understand that there is true prophecy.

And yet that Psalm is not finally a lament but a triumph song. The last verse goes like this. And the triumph it prophesies is the Resurrection of Jesus from the tomb.

They shall come and the heavens shall declare his righteousness: unto a people that shall be born, whom the Lord hath made.

You are that people. And if you follow in your heart his Cross and Passion, you will rejoice with him in his Resurrection.