

Sermon Palm Sunday Year B 2024

The events we come now to commemorate this coming week – the solemn liturgies of today, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and then at Easter – all help sharpen in our hearts and minds what is central to our faith. Over the coming days, the key elements of our faith are laid out for us. Because most of us are pretty thick, or willfully ignorant, we need reminding (constant reminding!) of what is important. Just as we set aside one day a week to attend to the mysteries of our faith, so we set aside one week a year to attend to the mysteries of our faith. Each year we set aside one week to just lay it all out there. Now, how we are meant to *approach* this week is indicated in the name given it: Holy Week. ‘Holy’ meaning *consecrated, set apart*. A week *set apart* so we might attend to what is truly distinct about our faith. And we can only receive what this ‘set apart’ week is offering us if we set *ourselves* apart *for* this week.

And why wouldn’t we?! Why wouldn’t we make the extra effort asked of us this week? This week, Mother Church lays out a feast for us! Now, we could nibble around the edges. We could say ‘oh no, I’m on a diet.’ We could say, ‘I’m getting my nourishment elsewhere thank you very much.’ We could play at the food with a fork, pushing aside the things we don’t like. Or we can dive in... We can just accept the feast now laid out for us as a wondrous, mysterious, gift. And *it is* worth diving in deep! It is worth accepting the gift this week offers us. It is worth making the extra effort because we not only remember what makes our faith truly unique. We also experience it.

This week we can realize in a heightened way what makes our faith truly unique. Because this week we will that Christianity is not principally about a philosophy, although it can incorporate philosophy. It’s not primarily a mystical path, though it can incorporate mysticism. It’s not principally about providing an ethical code for living. Though it offers one. It’s not something that comes from the welling up of natural experience. Though it accommodates that. *Christianity is about something that happened. And there are witnesses of it.* Something happened. And there are witnesses of it... Without this Christianity falls apart. What distinguishes the gospels from any other form of religious literature whether the Sufi poets, or Buddhist sages, or Confucian philosophers - whatever - the gospels stand out because they seek to grab you by the collar and tell you: *something happened!* Other religions might talk about ethical principles, and mystical intuitions, and deep philosophical ideas. But there tends to be something insular and self-reflective and introspective about them.

But then there are the gospels. And the clue to what they are all about is again in the very name: *evangelion*: good news. News. Something happened. And there were witnesses to this something. And so overwhelmed were these witnesses by what they saw that they wanted to grab everybody by the collar and tell them about it! That's Christianity. So, what happened?... Jesus. Jesus happened. Witnesses saw and heard his teaching and preaching. They saw his healing. But above all they saw him dying, and they saw him risen from the dead.

They saw him dying. Now, the first-century Romans knew how to put people to death. They were expert at an almost industrial scale on how to execute enemies of empire. And it was very important for them *that crucifixion be public*. It was meant as a deterrent. This is why Jesus was crucified right outside the walls, right outside the city gates, so anyone coming and going would *see him*.

And so, we have in the Passion account we have just heard, details that convey this precise point: the public nature of Jesus' crucifixion. An event *seen and witnessed* by people. We have heard today how Jesus was presented to *a crowd*, a crowd who cry for his crucifixion. A crowd who accept Barabbas - a rebel and a murderer - in the place of Jesus. And then we hear how *the whole cohort* are called together in Pilate's courtyard. There to mock him, to cloak him with a purple robe, to twist a crown of thorns and place it upon his head. Who strike him and spit upon him. In public. We have heard how he was led through the city to Golgotha. In public. How then he was crucified with the charge, 'King of the Jews' set against him. Again, this signboard meant to be read by those passing by, so they would see and understand: *this is what happens to such pretenders*. And all this, we are told, in the presence of the scribes and chief priests, and of *women standing a distance, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and Joses, and Salome...and many other women*. And the Centurian, who *stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this was the Son of God*. Stood facing him. Saw him... But then of course those first witnesses saw something else. And that part of the story we will celebrate when we gather here just in just a week's time, next Sunday, the day of Resurrection.

But in between, over the course of this week, we will have placed before us the whole story that brings home the point: *this happened*. We know (hopefully!) the general *outline* of the story. But I would suggest it is the *details* - sometimes rather curious details - that really underscores this point and so the uniqueness of our faith.

Details that would only be included because someone remembered them, because someone saw them. Earlier in the Passion account we hear of Peter warming himself by the fire in the courtyard of the high priest. And of a passer-by Simon, who appears here and nowhere else, compelled to carry the cross. But we will also hear of Judas, who slipped out from the table of the Last Supper. We will hear of the women anxious about who would roll away the stone. Small, and in many ways insignificant details. But if constructing a mythic tale, there would be no need to include such details. Why include all these unless they were vividly remembered? All point to the fact: *this happened*. On Easter Day we will hear from the book of Acts, *This Jesus, we ate and drank with him after his resurrection from the dead*. In short, *We are witnesses to it*.

In the opening verse of the First Letter of John, the author confirms this point when he says, *we declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands... And that's the difference*. It is real. Something happened. We saw it. The gospels affirm that in Jesus is someone with whom his witnesses ate and drank, was touched and seen. And even to this day, this lay at the radical heart of our faith. This is what preserves Christianity from just being a philosophical ideal, or one religion amongst many, or just an ethic for living. Our faith is based on witnesses who saw something happen. And because it is real it demands of us a real response.

What we are doing over this coming week – this holy, consecrated, ‘set apart’ week – is that *we* become witnesses to what happened. Already, we have waved palms and shouted Hosanna, walking with our Lord into Jerusalem. On Thursday we will wash feet and share a meal with him. We will then accompany him to the Garden of Gethsemane and (if we can), stay awake and watch with him in prayer. On Friday we will see Christ on his Cross, laid bare for all the world to see. And we will be invited to not remain distant, but to come close. On Saturday we will watch by the tomb and wait for the first glimpse of resurrection light. We are witnesses to these things.

This week (if we allow it) we can experience what Christianity has said from the beginning: that we can know and encounter Christ still. Yes, what happened in Jesus happened in a real time and in a real place. But more than that. His story can intersect with our story. We can witness to the truth of Christ by the witness of our lives. This week, in word and deed, we are invited to affirm this truth. This week can be for us a ‘holy’ week. If we set ourselves apart, we too can be witnesses of these things. Amen.