

Lent V

When I am lifted up I will draw all people to myself.

Today is the beginning of Passiontide, when our observance of Lent focuses increasingly on the passion of Jesus. We turn to the Cross, where Jesus, we believe, revealed the depths of God's love for all people.

It is a most shocking symbol – something we often forget, as we wear it on a golden chain or have it as a lapel badge:

gallows and rope

guillotine – 18th century France

electric chair

gas chamber

hypodermic syringe

a pile of stones

a sabre or an axe

It really is a shocking symbol and it should shake any complacency we might have about what it means to follow in the footsteps of the one whose faithfulness and obedience to God, led him to the place of state murder. He said:

“if anyone wants to be my follower, let them take up their cross and follow me” – the Way of Faithful Discipleship is the Way of the Cross.

“When I am lifted up – on the cross – I will draw all people to myself”

When he was lifted up on the cross he was deserted by all, but his Mother, the beloved disciple and a few faithful and courageous women.

On the cross we see pure, naked love revealing itself. I recently prepared for the devotions for the Stations of the Cross and came to the tenth, the Stripping of Jesus – there we reflect on him stripped of his clothes, standing naked, vulnerable, abused, desecrated, weak. Here we see Love, and what a horrifying sight it is – nothing soft and sentimental. about this love. Nothing masks it, nothing compromises it – we see pure love revealed in this broken lacerated body:

“This is my body given for you and for all, that sins may be forgiven”

This is love and when he is raised up on the cross, with his arms extended, he is embracing the whole of creation, he is surrendering his life, that others might know life.

It was a manifestation, above all else of the depth of God’s love. This was summed up by a great figure of English spirituality, Julian of Norwich, as she reflected on the Passion of Jesus:

“Would you learn your Lord’s meaning in this thing?

Learn it well: Love was his meaning.

Who showed it to you? Love.

What did he show you? Only Love

And for what reason did he show you? For love

Hold on to this, and you will learn more of the same. But you will never, without end, learn in it any other meaning.” (Chapter 86)

Some interpretations of what Jesus was doing on the cross present different understanding of what was happening, which make it look more like some kind of business transaction to appease a vengeful father by the blood of his innocent son. A price must be paid to satisfy the demands of the Law. Verses can be quoted from the

Scriptures to justify such an interpretation but they do not affirm the supremacy of Love. Nor do they speak of the God, the Abba, who said:

I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice; the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings”

God was not the one demanding a victim; rather it was us, fallen humanity, who needed a victim, a scapegoat. God was among us, as one cast out, to show us that “we need never do this again”, as James Alyson wrote, though, sadly, we have continued to do it ever since.

Experiencing and knowing God is a risky business and on the cross we see the ultimate risk. Jesus’ revealing of God’s love, meant he remained faithful to the Father in all things – he walked in his way and in no other way. The Way, to which he witnessed was a way that challenged the religious, social and political authorities to their very core. Such a way of Incarnate Love is subversive. This was why he was nailed to the Cross – because he witnessed to a love that would not allow any compromise. Jesus had to die, in faithfulness to the mission he had embraced at his baptism.

On the Cross he remained faithful, even though he screamed out to God and felt utterly alone and abandoned. He remained faithful to God and God remained faithful to Him.

What happened on the cross was the ultimate triumph of love.

We are invited to share in this victory through our Baptism:

“Do you not know that all who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? - - - if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his”

Romans 6

We share in this victory, every time we celebrate the Eucharist and receive the holy communion: St Paul tells us

“Every time you eat the bread and drink the cup you are proclaiming the Lord’s death until he comes”

1 Cor 11:26

It is only as we commit ourselves to exploring the implications, of and living, in this way of costly loving, this taking up the Cross, that we can come to know, and rejoice in, the fullness of life that Jesus offers us.

Herbert McCabe (reflecting both Soren Kierkegaard and Archbishop Anthony Bloom):

“if you love will be crucified; if you do not, you are dead already”.

Social convention will see the Way of the Cross as foolishness – something to be avoided – there must be a more reasonable way, surely, a way that doesn’t conflict too much with our current life style and expectations?

As we embark on Passiontide, let us focus our minds and our prayers on the Cross and what it means for us, as a Christian community, witnessing to the world in this time of crisis, to the leaders of the G20. We are called to stand alongside and in deepest solidarity with the Crucified (what are the implications of this for us today?)

If this is our deep desire, then we will indeed be drawn close to the most loving heart of him who hung, both agonisingly and gloriously, upon the cross, we will know his very life pulsing through us and we will discover the imperative to reflect that selfsame love in our own lives; a love that longs to draw all within its embrace.

When I am lifted up I will draw all people to myself.

Amen