



**A sermon preached on Sunday 17th March 2013 (Passion Sunday)
by the Right Reverend Ronnie Bowlby**

'PASSION'

Today is often called 'Passion Sunday', because it marks the beginning of the final days in Jerusalem before the crucifixion of Jesus. The word Passion means **suffering**; not just feeling strongly about something, as you also find it used nowadays. A few days ago I heard someone on the radio saying that she was 'passionate' about Baroque music, and she did not mean that it was a pain to listen to!

When Jesus was anointed by Mary at Bethany, the story we heard in the Gospel a few minutes ago, a link is made with the idea of suffering for the sake of others; making a **sacrifice**, we say. And then there is **compassion**, the willingness to enter into, care about the suffering of others. This was something which very quickly established itself as one of the key qualities of Christian living, as Mandy reminded us in her talk last Sunday.

A lot of suffering in the World is caused by humans. What would the media do if it were not so? Jesus suffers physically and mentally at the hands of those in authority, both Jews and Romans, and from the crude abuse of the soldiers. When Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus entertained Jesus in their home, they must have been extremely distressed at the thought of what might happen to him. The Gospel reading hints at the kind of suffering which people experience when someone they love is in pain or dies, or is making a terrible mess of their lives through taking drugs, for instance. Or to take something very different, think of the suffering of Prisoners of Conscience; Peter and Beth Holgate remind us week by week of Amnesty and of the suffering and torture which people experience in making a stand for truth.

But what we sometimes forget is that suffering is also written into the history and working of the universe which you and I inhabit. To affirm that there is some kind of Creator whose name is Love is in fact to make a very substantial act of faith, as we have come to know more about how this world has evolved over millions and millions of years.

The poet Tennyson wrote:

“Man, who trusted God was love indeed,
And love Creation’s final law,
Through Nature, red in tooth and claw
With ravine , shrieked against his creed”.

Ravine means roughly ‘violence’. And if you watch Nature programmes on TV or read Darwin and his successors, you can see how difficult it is to believe in a loving and benevolent God, who is also responsible for such a harsh world. Evolution is in large measure the story of the powerful over coming the weak, and violence often features in the process.

Scripture is well aware of the enormous challenge to faith caused by the existence of so much suffering in the world. Think of the Book of Job in the Old Testament. And in the New Testament we see Jesus and then his followers healing people of various afflictions, making it clear that God wants us to be whole, not diminished by what goes wrong and the suffering that involves. Behind both Old and New Testaments there was a widespread belief that the reason for some of what was wrong and the suffering was the **presence of evil**, often personified as the Devil and his legions. Sometimes a healing is achieved by ‘casting out demons’.

Today we find this kind of explanation very difficult, though it helps us to understand why people saw Jesus’ death and resurrection as a kind of victory, and his suffering as a kind of road towards that. It is a view of suffering explicitly described in today’s Collect; ‘Grant that by faith in Him who suffered on the Cross we may triumph in the power of his victory’.

The same idea appears in early paintings which show Jesus ruling from the Cross with a crown on his head . But by the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, artists focussed much more on the reality of his physical sufferings, and we see the body of Jesus twisted and racked by pain. As you looked at such pictures, you were expected to feel in some way responsible for them too, because, if the truth be told, we are all capable of doing cruel things and treating others badly.

So it is a complicated picture with many unanswered questions.

But I want to end with one question which I find difficult to spell out, never mind what to do about it. Can any good come through suffering? Paul and others could write about suffering sometimes as if it were a kind of discipline, a lesson in obedience and self-control. Like athletes in training, who push themselves to the limit, however painful. They saw evidence of this in the way parents usually brought up their children then, something our Victorian forbears also accepted. Corporal punishment was intended to hurt, but was said to be 'for your own good'. Like an inoculation, a bit of mild violence when young would prevent you becoming more violent when you grow up!

That is not how most of us see it now. But put yourself in the shoes of our early Christians, facing persecution and poverty or for that matter, a modern Christian facing torture or intimidation in various forms. How to react? Can suffering somehow be turned into a vehicle of love, even towards those who are exuding hate and violence towards you? Jesus demonstrates that it is possible. Love is stronger than hate; Love holds you firm even as you suffer. Countless men and women have witnessed to this extraordinary fact ever since. Love actually is the ultimate meaning of the universe, despite violence, and all that has gone wrong and seems to deny this.

It is not easy to hold on to that, God knows, as you watch people being slaughtered in war or children dying of starvation. But what Passiontide invites us to do is keep company with him who we believe revealed God's true nature of love once and for all. Jesus is the pilgrim of suffering, but also the pilgrim of hope, drawing you and me into a deeper awareness of how to live in faith despite suffering.

Perhaps the new Pope, will experience a little of this too. And as St Chad's moves into a difficult phase, with no vicar and other problems, God calls us to be resolute in faith. As the Psalmist wrote; "In God I trust, and will not fear". Let no suffering of any kind turn us aside from that.