

## Lent and Passiontide Sermon 8 March 2015 5.45pm Jesus

*In nomine...*

What have you heard today? What words have entered your hearts? What words have you encountered? What Word has transformed you this evening?

Many words arise for me when I hear the Passion narrative once again. It is not a dead story, not simply an oft-repeated old tale. It is a narrative of life, of power. Of grief. It is sorrowful. There is a sense of deep disappointment. Of hope crushed. Of a human life, peoples' lives, crushed.

There is also great poise, gentle strength. Jesus' words are not many, and the dramatic reading makes this more apparent. Aslan's silent, noiseless presence echoes Christ's simple communications, or his wordless responses.

The words of others are, in the main, words of denial, violation, accusation, questioning, ridicule, command, demand.

The words of Jesus are words of healing in the midst of violence; peace in the midst of tense conflict; truth in the midst of false and manipulative accusation; trustful courage in the face of suffering. Something held – yet also being handed over.

For me, the words of handing and handling are illuminated today in this text retold.

Distilling the narrative, pinpricks of light fall in surprising places. The colt, for the Entry into Jerusalem, with the palms and the praises: not an odd story about property temporarily claimed for Jesus, but rather a portrayal of a young creature, *unbroken*. A rider talks about "breaking in" a horse. This colt has not yet carried a burden. Now it is bedecked with cloaks and Jesus is enthroned on its back. It steps on cloaks and palm branches cast in its path. This colt's first burden is the joyful, gentle, liberating burden of Christ.

The preparation for the Passover supper picks out the man who shows the way to the upper room. "Carrying a jar of water", it is he who meets the disciples, not the other way around. The carrier is the guide who brings Peter and John to prepare the scene for Jesus' last evening before death.

It is at the Last Supper that Jesus hands over the bread and the wine, declaring them his body and blood. The new covenant. As he hands over those symbols, so he hands over himself. This will become a foundational tradition in Christian discipleship. Tradition – literally a handing over. Jesus hands himself over to his beloved people. Not just his disciples, but also the authorities, to all people. When we here every

Thursday share bread and wine, we call to remembrance Jesus's great handing over *of himself*.

But handing over is also the language of betrayal, and how much that is brought out in Luke! "The hand of him who will betray me is with mine on the table", says Jesus. The hand of the betrayer signifies the concrete physicality of the betrayal, the brute reality to be shown in a simple kiss.

For a kiss is rarely simply about the lips, the mouth. It may involve a reaching out, touching, bringing the other closer to enable that sign of intimacy.

Jesus is the one who reaches out. A shaft of light in the darkness of the narrative now falls upon the bleeding servant of the high priest whose ear has been cut off by the sword of even one of Jesus's followers. Judas is not the only one to betray Jesus. Jesus's followers still do not know his message of peace. They harm someone, an employee, or someone even enslaved without choice.

Jesus reaches out his hand, Jesus touches and heals the man's wounded head. Perhaps the last free gesture of his hands before they are bound. Jesus's response to those who arrest him is that they have had so many chances "to lay hands on him". Now is the hour when their hands bind his.

Peter still tries to hold on to the seized Jesus. He follows him, joining the servants of the high priest around the fire in the courtyard. The fire casts its light on the hands of those who warm themselves there. Peter, imagine, is stretching out his hands towards the bright warmth, rubbing them, getting close. And as he reaches out his hands he denies Jesus. Once, and again, and a final time. He too betrays Jesus. So close to the imprisoned Jesus, yet his heart dares not reach out far enough. In great sorrow, he too separates himself from his Lord.

Now Jesus is surrounded only by guards. They beat him, hit him, ask him whose hands have struck him when blindfolded. All this manhandling before even the trial. Jesus is well and truly in enemy hands, the hands of the unjust.

The chief priests hand Jesus over to Pilate; Pilate hands Jesus over to Herod. In the Gospel of Matthew, Pilate washes his hands symbolically as he too finds himself manipulated by crowds and colleagues. No one wants blame or blood on their hands.

Jesus is condemned to death, and takes upon him his cross. Anyone who has visited Jerusalem will have seen and experienced the narrow streets crowded with sellers and hawkers and passers-by hurrying on their errands. To carry a vast piece of a

cross through that would be sore work for one who had been beaten, a rough handling of roughed-up flesh and rough wood, a humiliation beyond the humanity of which Jesus is now being deprived. It becomes Simon of Cyrene's problem. He now has the cross on his hands, on his shoulder, on his back. Before – at their skeletal destination – the manhandled, mangled body of Jesus is fixed to the cross. Christ's hands are nailed, not to move in love, not to reach out, not to touch anything but the splintered wood. Thus pinioned, for three or so hours, now the light goes out. Jesus calls out and commends himself into the hands of his God and Father.

And you? What do you have on your hands at the moment? How are you handling life? How are you handling this story?

Perhaps you have your own sorrows on your hands. Perhaps things you regret or worry about. Perhaps you simply have too much on your hands. Maybe you are burdened and you feel only too aware of the cross you have to bear. To you, the passion narrative today offers the promise of companionship in your load, another pair of hands to share your work.

To all of us, the passion narrative opens our eyes to the importance of holding out our hands to Jesus, to receive what it is that God wants to give us. For by knowing human suffering and death, Jesus can bless us with the fullness of life. That is what he came to bring. That is what he yearns to place in our hands, our hearts.

We are being handed Jesus. In the words of the Gospel and all Holy Scripture. In the bread and wine of communion, the Last Supper remembered. In the peace that floods us when stilled in prayer or meditation or mindfulness. Jesus is entrusted to us, for ourselves and for those whose lives we in turn touch. Faith sown and faith grown is held out to us as a possibility. It is a precious gift that is placed in our hands as the passion gospel is read out to us. A gift that we can hold, consider, cherish. Jesus hands us himself. Jesus hands us love.

And Jesus handles us with love. Holding us, gently forming us, healing what is sore, what is painful in our lives and spirits. Hands of the Saviour that are unshakeable, the hands of a craftsman, hands of skill and strength. You too can hand yourself over, entrust yourself, your pains and pleasures, into those everlasting hands. You and I and all creation can be held in the embrace of the one who opened his arms to us, stretched out on the cross. Into these hands may we commit our spirits, our lives, ourselves.

Hands wide open: yours, mine, and Christ's.