

What happens to our pain?

Our readings this morning provide for us a striking contrast in the way that they portray Jesus. On the one hand we have our passage from John's Gospel – and what we know about John's Gospel is that it paints a very distinctive picture of Jesus, one that is quite different from the other three gospels. Like all the gospels of course John was written after Jesus's resurrection and, as with the other gospels, that profoundly affected the way they described him. It's a bit like writing up a report of a football match. Your report cannot help but be affected by the outcome – who won. The way you describe the match, the teams, the play is bound to be affected by what you know of the eventual result of the match. And while this is true of all the gospels it is even more accentuated with John. When John looks back on Jesus' ministry and tries to relate it, it is as if the full blinding light of Jesus' resurrection is shining back on Jesus, sometimes revealing things that were not noticed or whose significance was not recognised at the time. And for John, Jesus' resurrection has revealed him to be the Lord of glory. It has disclosed his divine identity, his eternal stature as God's living Word. That's why, for example, in order to try to convey who Jesus is John has to go right back to the very beginning of everything. That's why John's Gospel begins with those sublime words, 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and... all things come to be through him...' This ultimately is how the rabbi of Nazareth is re-envisioned and reconfigured when bathed in the light of his resurrection.

Now, because of all that, John has a very positive, triumphant 'take' on Jesus' crucifixion – this is a point that we will return to on Good Friday. For John, reading the crucifixion through the lens of the resurrection, Jesus' being raised up on the cross is nothing less than his enthronement, his coronation, his moment of glory. And not only that but it is the point at which the world begins to be drawn back to God, back into God's loving embrace from which it has fallen. So in our passage this morning from John 12 Jesus says 'I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself'. For John the crucifixion is not a tragedy but is rather the high-point at which Jesus is exalted such that the pull of grace draws all people to him. And it's beginning to happen already as we read that certain Greeks who went up to Jerusalem asked

to see Jesus – already the world is being drawn to him, beating a path to his cross.

This, then, is John's Jesus, exalted and sovereign and in full command of events: the regal Jesus who has earlier insisted that he lays down his life of his own free will and that no-one takes it from him. He is in no way a victim – he is in charge, the Lord of glory, glowing with the radiance of heaven from whence he came.

Now that is great and it's all very well – but there is a problem. The problem is that if this is the only picture we have of Jesus then how is Jesus like us? He is sovereign, fully in control of events. But that makes him very different from us, we who often feel weak and helpless, we who are buffeted by life's storms, we who often feel at the mercy of things far beyond our control, we who often are victims. What has such a Christ to do with us?

Well, this is where it is so important to put our reading from Hebrews alongside the one from John. The letter to the Hebrews is interesting. It begins with a very strong presentation of Jesus as sovereign and divine – a little like John's portrayal. The Letter to the Hebrews begins by describing Jesus in highly exalted terms, as God's Son, superior to the angels, the one through whom, in these latter, days, God has spoken to us. He is the one through whom God created the worlds, and who sustains all things by his powerful word – and that is all very John-like in its portrayal of Jesus' divine glory and stature. Yet by the time we reach our passage this morning we find a very different note. Here Jesus is pictured uttering loud cries and tears. Here Jesus is presented as learning obedience and suffering. This is a vulnerable Jesus, a Jesus entangled in the human condition, a Jesus subject to pain and anguish, wrestling with submission to the will of God.

Now what is the writer doing here? What is his argument? Well, what the writer is doing here is presenting Jesus as our High Priest. More about the high priest anon but suffice to say here that there were two crucial features of a high priest. One was that he was appointed by God. He had to be God's choice, God's appointment because of the seriousness of his role. The other qualification was that the high priest had to be drawn from the people – or in other words he had to understand the lives of the people. He had to know what everyday life was like and to be able to sympathise with all the struggles and burdens that ordinary people experienced for reasons that we'll see. Now these two features – being appointed by God and knowing and understanding human

life – are both attributed to Jesus here. First, in verse 5, we read that ‘Christ did not glorify himself...but was appointed by the one who sent him.’ Jesus was God’s appointment! But secondly he knew and understood human life because he had experienced it to the full, immersing himself in its joys and sorrows, its triumphs and its tragedies, its cries and its tears and its fears. So just a few verses before our reading the writer has declared, ‘we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.’ Jesus knew human life inside out!

Now with all this as background I want to now ask two questions – two urgent questions that face us this morning, questions about faith and belief. Those two questions are firstly, ‘why Christianity?’ And the other question is ‘what about suffering? Can we make any sense at all of it? Those are two questions that demand to be asked! So firstly, ‘why Christianity?’ After all, as we know, we live in a multi-faith world, a world of many faiths and religions which often vie with one another for our allegiance. And people are confused by the chaotic diversity of religion and they wonder, why choose Christianity? Why be a Christian? Why Jesus? Well, I can only say that for me this is what does it for me. This is what marks Christianity out – that we believe that in Jesus God has come amongst us and shared human life to the full, living it from the inside out. This is the mystery of what we call the Incarnation, that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. In other words God does not remain safe and secure in heaven’s haven but comes down, taking on our flesh, walking in our shoes, drinking the deepest dregs from life’s cup. No other faith has anything like this.

That brings me, though, to the second question, ‘what about suffering?’ This is surely the Achilles heel of the Christian faith – how a supposedly all-powerful, completely good and loving God allows such hellish pain and suffering. It’s a question that will not go away and to which there are no satisfactory answers and only a fool would try to give glib explanation. But perhaps this is where we begin. Just picture what is before us in this passage. This one sent from God, this sustainer of all things by his word, this one through whom God has finally spoken to us, shares in human suffering. We’re told in our passage that in his life, in his flesh, ‘he offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears’ and our minds turn perhaps to the garden of Gethsemane where in such anguish at what lay before him Jesus

wrestled with God's will, as he sweated blood and bled tears. There in the garden Jesus pleaded to be spared, pleaded for the cup to pass - but the answer was no. So he knew the sorrow and the mystery of prayer requests denied and longings refused, just like us. He shared in the pity of our pain and our pleadings. Indeed going back to our reading from John, even John with his exalted view of Christ recognises a moment of turmoil in Jesus; 'Now my soul is troubled', says Jesus. 'And what should I say - 'Father, save me from this hour? No, it is for this reason that I came to this hour.' Here too is a Gethsemane moment when even John's regal Jesus flinches at the will of God. And of course from there Jesus goes on to suffer the agony of the cross. So it is that as Christians we dare to point to that tortured, bloodied figure hanging on a gallows and to declare, 'Behold your God!' And as the great theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, 'only a suffering God can help.' Only a suffering God can mean anything to us.

There is, however, more to it than this. The task of the high-priest is not just to share in our human condition, to enter into our suffering, but also to offer it up to God in prayer. The task of the high priest is not just sympathise and empathise with us but also to mediate between us and God, between earth and heaven. The high priest's role is not only to share in our groans and our sighs and our distress, but also to lift them up into the heavenly sanctuary of God, the holy of holies, and there to utter them deep into the heart of God. And from there our suffering can be transfigured and transformed. You see one of the terrors of our human predicament is that our cries are not heard beyond ourselves, that they simply echo back to us from a vast and empty universe. But here we are given a different picture. Here our cries do not just bounce off the walls of the cosmos but they are taken up into God, and there they are graced with God's love and compassion and from God's throne there flow strength and comfort and newness. Our cries do not have the last word for when they echo in the depths of God then they come back at us with hope of new possibilities.

You see, the question, I guess, that this passage from Hebrews throws at us is not why cries and tears, why suffering? That question doesn't get an answer in the Bible. The question is rather what becomes of our cries? What happens to our tears? Are they just lost, fading and dying in the vastness of an indifferent universe? Well, no. Picture Jesus. Picture Jesus - higher than the angels, at work in creation and sustaining all things by his word, yet the same Jesus sharing in our pain, immersed in our distress, sympathising with our

4
weakness. He has known suffering and is now able, as our high-priest to offer up our cries and tears, carrying them deep into God's embrace. And from there come grace and mercy and new life. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,
we praise and worship you, eternal Source of all that is,
Maker and lover of your wondrous creation;
and we praise you Jesus, eternal Son,
through whom all things were made and
all things are upheld,
the same Jesus who has come among
vulnerable in fragile human flesh.
And we praise you Holy Spirit,
giver of life and breath,
the very love that binds all things together
and who opens us up to God.

We worship you, living, loving God,
and we ask you to have mercy upon us,
and to forgive us for our sin,
for we confess to you our failure to live faithfully
and to love generously.
And we thank you, O God, for Jesus, our high-priest,
who has dealt with our sins and who is now
mediates to us your grace, your forgiveness.
We praise you for him, the source of our salvation.
Inspire us we pray with your love,
Fill our hearts with gratitude
for all that you have done to give us new life,
and help us we pray to live new lives.
We pray in Jesus' name and in his words
we pray together, saying...

O gracious God,
You have given us Jesus as our high priest,
the appointed place where earth is open to heaven
and where prayer is gathered up and offered to God.
And you call your church to share in Jesus'
priestly ministry of prayer,
lifting up to God the joy and sorrows of the world.
We pray today for the peace of the city in which we are set:
for Amsterdam in all its life and diversity.
We pray for our politicians and elected representatives,

that they may govern our city
in ways that are right and true and just.
And we pray for those who struggle to find peace in the city:
for those caught in addictions,
for those who struggle with poverty,
for those for whom this is not their home
but who have been forced to flee here...
And on this Sunday of our AGM
we pray especially for our church
and for its life and witness:
bless especially all those in positions of responsibility,
bless all the activities that take place on our premises,
remembering the many groups who use our hall,
and our witness to the many thousands of visitors
who pass through our doors every week.
And we pray for the community around our door,
For our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters in the chapel opposite
and the women who live in the Begijnhof -
O God bless especially our relationship with them
and grant that we may live together in peace and friendship.
And God hear us as we pray for those in
our fellowship in special need at this time:
for Beryl in hospital, for Christa recovering from surgery,
for Peggy and Elke, for Lottie at this time of change.
O God hear our prayers as they ascend to you
through our high-priest, Jesus;
may they and all that we pray for be taken into your heart
and from there may there flow grace and mercy and peace onto us.