

Lent 4

Sunday sermon by The Ven Luke Irvine-Capel, Archdeacon of Chichester

We hear in our Gospel today that just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up that all who believe in him might have eternal life.

Through these days of Lent, this time in the desert and wilderness of repentance, we have been praying that we might grow in holiness by denying ourselves, taking up the cross and following Jesus.

All who gazed upon the serpent that Moses held up were healed and restored, and as we continue this pilgrimage through Lent we gaze with increasing intensity at the Cross in and through which we find our life and salvation. On the cross we come face to face with the glory of God's love made manifest and the perfection of holiness.

We can encounter the intense holiness of Jesus we are provoked. Like the prophet Isaiah, when he has a vision of God, we can respond with awe and repentance. Or, as we shall hear in a couple of weeks time, during the drama of Holy Week, we can find it a rebuke to our own selfishness and sinful ways and seek to banish it just as the crowds cried out "crucify him" and the blasphemous "we have no king but Caesar."

So, standing at the foot of the cross, looking at the One who is lifted up before us, we have to choose between life and death, light and darkness. Do we pour out our lives in love and service of the One who pours out his life for us upon the Cross? Do we forgive even as we have been forgiven, be merciful as we have received mercy, love as we have been loved? When we do, we are uniting ourselves with the Lord in his Passion, being obedient to the will of the Father and, so, growing in holiness, which is nothing less than sharing in the life of God himself.

Not many of us are called to lay down our lives, literally, in bearing witness to the truth, beauty and goodness of God revealed in the offering of Son upon the cross. We do, though, remember and pray for those who are martyrs in the persecuted Church of our time remembering their courageous witness – lifting up the Son of Man in their lives.

We are, though, all called to the 'white martyrdom' of faithfulness and endurance and prayer as we pour out our lives for love of Him.

Throughout the ages we have seen revealed in faithful Christian lives the way in which God has renewed and purified His Church, and brought new patterns of order into a disordered world. The flame of utter givenness is life-changing, life-giving and world-saving.

A priest of the Community of the Resurrection, Fr Jonathan Graham CR, once told of hearing the voice of Jesus speaking to him in the silence and stillness of his heart. The Lord said to him, "Don't you know that the only thing that has ever done any good is my Passion."

That should be shot through our lives like Littlehampton through a stick of rock! We are all called to undertake many tasks and to be involved in all sorts of schemes and plans, but "the

only thing that has ever done any good is my Passion.” We need to live that, to share it and to make it a reality in our lives. As the baptised, the holy people of God, we have to die with Christ and be buried with him, that we may come to share his risen and glorious life, that is our destiny.

So, when we are faced with suffering and loss we should not be afraid.

It is interesting that in Scripture there are no bridges. The only way across water in the Bible is to go through it. As the Israelites went through the Red Sea, crossing from Jordan into the Promised Land, so we, with Jesus, must go into the waters of baptism, through suffering and death, before we can enter the Promised Land of the Kingdom of God and His Resurrection Life. This is not something that happens, just once, at the moment of our baptism, but day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute. It is the life-long task of repentance and conversion of life.

As we persevere in the way of the cross, the way of repentance, let us pray that we may be intimately conformed to Jesus by shedding all that is contrary and opposed to him in our lives. Let our prayer be, this week, that we may shed all that is not Jesus. That is the end of a life lived in and through the Passion of Jesus – a life in which he is lifted up and the glory of God made manifest.