

## Sacrificial love

A sermon preached by The Venerable Jonathan Chaffey, Archdeacon of Oxford on the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent, 21 March 2021

*Refs: Jeremiah 31.31-34; Hebrews 5.5-10; John 12.20-33*

It's good to be with you this morning on the Fifth Sunday of Lent, a day more traditionally known as Passion Sunday. The word passion is derived from the Latin word 'passio', meaning 'suffering'. Today marks the beginning of Passiontide which continues to the crucifixion of Jesus on Good Friday. Whilst not a term in common parlance, Passiontide is still reflected in the performance of Passion Plays, which focus on Holy Week and Easter - but it's also represented in nature through Passion Flowers: beautifully delicate yet hardy flowers, they exhibit cross shaped petals surrounded by filaments that can be observed as a crown of thorns. Over time the popular meaning of passion has evolved into a description of strong, almost uncontrollable, emotion or feeling for a particular cause. This modern take on passion in a sense remains true to the suffering of Jesus, except in one respect: in his single-minded mission Jesus remained in full control. In our Gospel reading he revealed his resolute determination to see through his mission, when speaking to some Greeks who were visiting Jerusalem for the Passover: "*Shall I say, 'Father, save me from this hour? No, it was for this very reason that I came to this hour. Father glorify your name'*".

Passiontide, then, is a good opportunity in the Church's year to reflect on the passion of Jesus. Such sacrificial love - to give freely one's innocent self on behalf of a guilty world. Who would do such a thing- and why? The writer to the Hebrews offers us a way of understanding. He aptly calls Jesus a 'high priest' in the order of Melchizedek. Now Melchizedek was more than a priest; he was a King! His name actually means 'King of Righteousness'. We first come across him in Genesis 14 as the Priest-King of Salem (which later became Jerusalem). He offered hospitality of bread and wine to Abram and blessed him in the name of 'God most high'. In return he received a tithe of Abram's goods, quite a gift from the Father of Faith. His status, that was both royal and religious, was unique within the Old Testament. Melchizedek is described later in Hebrews as a King '*without father or mother...without beginning or end...a Priest for ever'*'. As such he belonged to a priesthood that was higher than that of Aaron's, which was the custodian of the OT law. In this respect he foreshadowed the mission of Jesus, who is both Sovereign and High Priestly, exercising authority through a sacrificial love that intercedes for humanity with his body on the cross.

No wonder St Paul described the message of the cross as foolishness in human terms yet to those who have faith, as the wisdom and power of God. Eternal majesty exercised in ground-level servanthood, divine strength in human weakness, resulting in a new creation born out of suffering.

So what does that mean for us? The Greeks approached Philip, "*Sir, we want to see Jesus'*". 500 years ago Martin Luther said that to understand the Christian message we must start with the wounds of Christ. 200 years ago Charles Simeon had that text fastened to his pulpit. So today, Jesus continues to offer a new beginning, a fresh promise, a lasting covenant – one not reliant on our successes or failures, but on his grace. We see him in the scriptures, we receive him in the bread and the wine of our communion service - how we long for that to be available in person again – but we also receive him by faith in our daily lives. Jesus is the fulfilment of Jeremiah's New Covenant, God's law rooted in our hearts and minds: "*I will be their God and they will be my people'*".

I encourage you to reflect on the passion of Jesus over the next couple of weeks, on the priest-king. His was a suffering with an eternal purpose; as the one who was in the beginning and is without end, he remains by our side. He takes our brokenness, whether individual or within our church and parish communities. He can make all things new, beginning with us. And in so doing he calls us to imitate his love: "*Whoever serves me must follow me'*". As our diocesan vision puts it, we are to be a '*Christ-like Church for the sake of God's world'*'. Whatever you do for your neighbour, how you listen, interact and serve, do it in his name. It may perhaps appear like a grain of wheat that falls to the ground, and you may need to persevere, but God can transform our offering into life-giving bread.

**Amen**