

HOMILY FOR GOOD FRIDAY
19 APRIL 2019

Today's first reading comes from the fourth Song of the Suffering Servant from the prophet Isaiah, and dates from the time of Israel's exile in Babylon in the early 6th century BC. The final phrase of the reading says of that servant, who for Christians seems a clear prefiguring of the suffering Christ, that 'he was praying all the time for sinners'.

More explicitly in the second reading from the letter to the Hebrews, we hear of Jesus, who is described as 'the supreme high priest', who has felt our weaknesses with us, who has been tempted as we are, albeit without sin, and who 'during his life on earth offered up prayer and entreaty, aloud and in silent tears'.

So strikingly, both these readings on this day of the Passion of the Lord, suggest to us that his suffering, the story of the trials he underwent before the religious authorities of his people and Pilate, the Roman governor, his mocking and scourging, his crucifixion and his agonizing death were all a prayer. For the suffering servant a prayer for us sinners and for the letter to the Hebrews a prayer to the one who had the power to save him out of death. Jesus prays for us in his Passion and he prays to the one who alone has the power to save him, and to save us in him.

In the story of the Passion the most sustained scene in which Jesus prays is the garden of Gethsemane. In St Mark's version we are told this: 'And he began to feel terror and anguish, And he said to them, 'My soul is sorrowful to the point of death. Wait here and stay awake.' And going on a little further he threw himself on the ground and prayed that if it were possible, this hour might pass him by, 'Abba Father' he said, 'For you everything is possible. Take this cup away from me. But let it be as you, not I, would have it.' In St Luke's account, as we heard last Sunday, it is said that in this prayer his sweat fell to the ground like great drops of blood. Mark's use of the phrase 'Abba Father' an intimate form of address, lets us into this inner prayer of the Son to his Father. It is hardly how it looks from the outside but in some way the Passion is an intimate story of love between Father and Son, into which we are drawn who so sorely need this saving love.

As always on Good Friday, we heard the Passion according to St John and John does not have an account of the garden of Gethsemane, but he hints at it. When Peter cuts off the ear of Malchus, the high priest's servant, Jesus says to Peter 'Put your sword back in its scabbard; am I not to drink the cup that the Father has

given me'. In this reference to the soul sorrowful to the point of death, we have the same point as in the reading from Hebrews when it told us that Jesus the true High Priest offered up prayer and entreaty, aloud and in silent tears. He who offered this prayer to the one who had the power to save him, and to save us sinners in him.

St John's Passion in all its dramatic effect is a Passion Gospel of salvation and therefore of triumph, but not in any sense of human vainglory; it is something much deeper than this. This theme too, of an answer to and an outcome of the prayer was already to be found in our first two readings. So of the suffering servant we heard that he will prosper and, in a phrase so apt for the St John Passion, that 'he will be lifted up', exalted and raised to great heights. He shall see the light. In the letter to the Hebrews, we are told of Jesus, the true High Priest, that he submitted so humbly that his prayer was heard: 'Although he was Son, he learnt to obey through suffering; but having been made perfect, he became for all who obey him the source of eternal salvation'. The prayer is answered; salvation is achieved.

From early in his Gospel St John hints to us that Jesus' destiny will be to be crucified, but that this raising up will in fact be a salvation wrought by Christ the suffering King. So in chapter 3 of John to Nicodemus, Jesus says 'as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so must the Son of man be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life'. In chapter 12 Jesus says 'when I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all people to myself'.

To Pilate Jesus, in their protracted exchanges in John, at last is brought to answer the question: 'So you are the king then' with this response: 'Yes I am a king. I was born for this; I came into the world for this; to bear witness to the truth'. Of course neither Pilate, though dimly he seems to grasp it, nor the chief priests, nor even his own disciples, can conceive of a king like this. When Pilate brings him out dressed in a purple robe and with the crown of thorns, Pilate says 'This is the man' and later 'Here is your king'. When the chief priests object to the sign he puts up 'King of the Jews' Pilate retorts 'What I have written, I have written'; is this merely truculent impatience or again somehow, as St John portrays it, a dim grasp of a deeper truth. When Jesus dies lifted up on the cross, his last word has a deliberate multiplicity of meaning, which includes: it is finished, but also it is accomplished, or it is fulfilled'. After his death one of the soldiers pierces his side with a lance and there comes out blood and water: the water of baptism and the blood of the Eucharist, the beginning of the sacramental life of the Church, by which *we* lay hold of the salvation won for us in the triumph of the cross.

And it is upon this salvation that we now here today lay hold. We come to pray with the praying Christ for the Church and the world. We come to kiss the cross of him who was lifted up for us to draw us to himself. We come to receive again the sacrament of his body given for us and his blood shed for us. After the piercing of the side, the evangelist says ‘This is the evidence of one who saw it – trustworthy evidence, and he knows he speaks the truth and he gives it so that you may believe as well’. Indeed we too here today, here and now in this place, as we share in these mysteries, may know and believe.