

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for Good Friday
April 2nd 2021

As with everything else, Good Friday is rather different this year. Most significantly, when the time comes for us to venerate the cross, we will have to keep our distance. This feels very hard. It was always one of the most moving moments of the year when all alike, young and old, devout and seeking, fit and weak, all come to kiss the feet that walked love into our world. This year we must, quite rightly, keep our distance, and this feels hard. Part of the point of crucifixion, of course, was to separate people, to take them away, to lift them up on high where they were exposed and humiliated, but also where no-one could reach out to help them. Each year in the past we have stepped across that gap to console the suffering Christ with our act of loving reverence, but this year we must keep our distance. We must leave a gap between him and us. We will still be able to venerate the cross, but at a distance; we will still be able to pause before it and make a gesture of reverence, but from a distance. This seems so utterly alien to us, because the whole thrust of the life of Christ is bridging the gap between God and humanity, leaping across the divide to bring them both together. God's love brings together, unites and builds up; human sin splits up, separates and destroys.

When we stand, each of us alone, before the cross this afternoon, we will be doing what the witnesses to the first crucifixion did: looking on from a distance. They looked on in horror at the sight, as the Old Testament Reading says 'The crowds were appalled on seeing him – so disfigured did he look that he seemed no longer human'. Like them, we will look on appalled, appalled at what people can do to one another. But the reading from Isaiah continues: 'So will the crowds be astonished at him, and kings stand speechless before him; for they shall see something never told and witness something never heard before'.

This is an appalling sight, this crucifixion, and it brings home to us just how appalling every act of human cruelty truly is. But if we look hard enough, being appalled may begin to turn to astonishment at something never told before. As our eyes adjust to the sight before them, they see that there is salvation in this humiliation, salvation in this nakedness. There is no-one so poor as the man on the cross, he has been stripped of everything to the extent that even his life is almost gone, but there is in this nakedness something of the essence of humanity. Humans are most truly human when they stand naked before the love of God, free of all the trappings of fashion or style or self-importance, free from all the cues that the way we dress gives about who we are. Naked we stand before him just as ourselves; there is no pretence and all that we can do is rely on his love, allowing him just to wash us in that love. Ironically Jesus is, then, never more fully human than high up on that cross; he is never more truly a King, indeed, than up on that cross, not protected (or disguised) by fine clothes and jewels as earthly kings are, but reigning purely in the dignity of his character, of who he is. His royal robes are blood and dirt and spit, and wearing these alone he is infinitely more a king than any other has ever been.

This is all too much to think of us we each stand before the cross – we would be here all day. Enough, perhaps, to pause a moment and feel sorrow for all those times when we have chosen to be distant from him, chosen to step back, chosen to forget him or ignore him or act as if he did not exist, all those times when we have acted as if he was not our brother and our Saviour and our Lord. In spite of all those times, this time we really wish we could step closer, step across the gap and draw close. And just the wishing will be enough.