

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for Good Friday (Year A) 7th April 2023

'Christ was humbler yet....'

The Letter to the Philippians contrasts the humility of Christ, the Son of God who accepted death, and not just any death but a humiliating criminal's death in public, being made a spectacle of to suppress the others, with what follows: God raises him on high. The Romans, in league with the Jewish leaders, raise him up on a cross; God raises him from the dead, then raises him further still, right up to the heights of Heaven.

The key that unlocks the raising on high is the humility. Christ is humble enough to leave behind the security and the glory of Heaven, to make his home with us on earth. He is humbler yet, being born in poverty in a stable; and he is humbler yet, seeking no fame or fortune, but only hearts; and then he is humbler yet, choosing to allow himself to become a victim, deliberately putting himself in a place where angry, frightened, powerful men can harm him; and he is humbler yet, allowing those angry, frightened, powerful men not only to harm him but to do so in the most public way possible, and the most dehumanising way possible. Crucifixion is specifically designed to humiliate people. They are lifted up high, so that no-one can touch them, no-one can comfort them, no-one can in any way relieve their pain, but at the same time everyone can see them. Their shame is as public as it could possibly be, and deliberately so. This death is designed to say to people: "look, see what has become of him, he thought he was something but we have made him nothing, we have made him barely human. We are so powerful that we can make anyone a nothing, a nobody, we can simply snuff them out, make them so horrible to look at that you will turn away and they are, in effect, no longer visible" That is what crucifixion is for. It is not simply a way of killing, it is a way of de-humanising.

And that is the death which Jesus chooses to accept. He was humbler yet. It is as if the Father kept saying to him 'Humbler, go humbler... and humbler....and humbler yet... ' until the very depths have been reached. The humility, the humbling, is the key that unlocks the raising. Only because Christ has descended so low can he spring with such energy to such heights. Only when the bottom of the pit has been reached, and there is nowhere lower to go, can he begin to spring up once again.

Christ cannot sink any lower than he does today: humiliated, ridiculed, abandoned. And this lowering of himself has a strange effect on us. As well as being appalled by it, something about it draws us to imitation. We are mesmerised by his ability to sink so low, and we find ourselves copying it. To begin with the priest sinks as low as he can – he can go no lower than lying on the floor – and this is his response to what he sees in Christ's acceptance of humiliation and rejection. And it seems that this imitation is catching, because all of us, as we approach the cross for veneration, sink to our knees. We cannot get any lower, either. On Good Friday Christ allows himself to be pushed down, and down, and down, and realising that in some way we do not fully understand this is a day to go lower, we join him in that. Down we go with him.

Clasping with a firm hold onto the body of the dead Christ, we sink lower and lower. His humiliation will never be complete, because we will join him in it. He will not really be alone. We sink down with him, trusting that this sinking is not definitive. He has promised that it will not be the end, and as we hold him fast we trust, and hope, and believe that it will not be. Humbler and humbler, lower and lower we go. For today we will only know the feeling of sinking down and down. But tomorrow – ah, tomorrow, it will be so different. Tomorrow that sinking will slow and slow, and there will be a moment when the body is still, neither sinking nor rising: and then as the Saturday day turns to night and the body hangs still, suddenly there is a great kick against the bottom of the pit of loneliness and loss and the body we are clinging to will rise, and rise and rise, higher and higher until it is raised from the dead (with us still clinging to it) and rise, and rise to the heights: and we who sank with him, clinging hard to him, will rise with him. We can trust him that the sinking of today will turn to rising; it is that knowledge that allows us to call this Friday 'Good'.