

Devotional on Palm/Passion Sunday April 5th, 2020
(During the Covid-19 pandemic)

I said in my first midweek update (all updates and virtual church services are available at the St. Thomas and St. Matthew websites) that this will be the first time in since the fateful events we just heard read for us that Christians will not gather to remember and celebrate them. Christians will not gather on the *via del a rosa*, the path of pain, they will not go to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre or gather at St. Peter's Square or at any of the hundreds of thousands of cathedrals, and village chapels that dot the world. This is extraordinary, unprecedented and for some, downright silly and stupid.

In this brief devotional I want to share why far from being silly and stupid the reality we face is, first of all, an opportunity to be in solidarity with Jesus' first followers and with all Christians who have or who are suffering pain and isolation. For as the story we just read points out, it certainly wasn't joy, peace and love that were at the forefront, but shame, fear, powerlessness and scapegoating.

Secondly, the reality we face helps us grapple with something quite astounding: far from being silly or stupid, never has the world acted in such a concerted "Christ-like way" in the face of an enemy. But I'm getting ahead of myself and what I've just said is by way of introduction.

I begin this devotional by paraphrasing the opening two paragraphs from the brilliant one volume history of Christianity by the Oxford historian Diarmaid MacCulloch. If you've not had the pleasure and you're looking for something to do during this crisis, and you can get your hands on it, either digitally or in print, I'd encourage you to read it.

In seventeenth-century England, there lived a country parson called Samuel Crossman. A rather reluctant Anglican of Puritan outlook, he spent most of his ministry in a small Gloucestershire parish.

He wrote a handful of devotional poems, one of which, in an unusual metre, a work of genius. We're going to sing it in a minute, but beginning with the phrase "My song is Love unknown," it tells the story of Jesus' arrest, trial, death and burial with an exclamation of quiet joy that this suffering so long before had shaped the life of Mr. Crossman in his little English parsonage:

It ends with: "Here might I stay and sing, No story so divine; Never was love, dear King! Never was grief like Thine. This is my Friend, In Whose sweet praise I all my days Could gladly spend!"

The intimacy of Crossman's lines hints at the degree to which Christianity is, at root, a personality cult. Its central message is the story of a person, Jesus, who was, is, and still is, Christians claim, the Christ, the Anointed One: an aspect of the God who was, is and ever shall be, yet who is at the same time a human being, set in historic time. Christians believe they can meet this human being in a fashion comparable to the experience of the disciples who walked with him in Galilee and saw him die on the Cross.

I like most of what MacCulloch says except his claim that "Christianity is, at root, a personality cult." I found it interesting that Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, gave the book a glowing review but also contested that point.

So, if it's not, which I assume is true, a personality cult, then what is it? What explains the depth of intimacy that Crossman penned?

I can't give a full-bodied answer to that in a devotional but I can say that it all relates to what was achieved on that horrible hill, Golgotha. Not the nature of the death, which was probably, despite Mel Gibson's portrayal, worse than the thousands of other people the Romans executed as they tried to keep their far-flung provinces in check, as they tried to keep their economies open, the supply chains that fed the ravenous citizens of the capital and other Roman cities of note.

What was achieved on the Cross was God's amazing exposure of "things as usual" "the status quo of power politics" and beginning of the great Reveal, the revealing of all victims and processes that contributed to victimization.

The glory of the Cross for Christians is not that we believe a particularly magnanimous personality, an especially charismatic and lovable teacher died on it. Indeed, the New Testament doesn't really reveal that much about Jesus' personality, his looks or psychological quirks.

Rather, the glory of the Cross for Christians is that we believe on it and through it, God's Love for Others was and is revealed in a way that actually empowers human beings to live from into this Love.

Christians worship Jesus as the embodiment of this Love because he acted on/in Truth for the sake of the world. This connects back to the beginning of this talk. Some, particularly on the right (I'm not trying to be "political" when I say that, just factual), are saying that the "best practices" advocated by our health professionals and by scientists are silly and stupid because they are going to ruin the world economy. They are drawing comparisons to other pandemics and saying things like "people die, we just need to get on with life and not 'sacrifice' the world economy."

All of us love routine, all of us love "getting on with life" in productive and creative ways; in other words, we love life, we want to live, we want to feel alive!

So did Jesus! He too had human desires and wants and needs, He too wanted to "feel alive," but he more than that he was willing to embody God's greatest desire, that all might live! That some, the few, the powerful and the intelligent shouldn't live at the expense of others and so he was willing to let his life go in order that that reality might come to pass!

Never in the Christian era have Christians en masse not met to observe Holy Week. But something more remarkable: never in *human* history has the whole world been asked to act in a "Christ-like" way for the vulnerable, at great economic and personal cost.

We have fundamental choices in the weeks and months ahead, choose to construe the truth in our own image, for the sake of our own advantage or choose to act on the truth for the sake of others.

This takes us far from the cult of personality straight into the heart of God's love, a love that allows us to echo Crossman's lyrics as we sing, Amen.