

Pusey House - Passion Sunday 2020 'On not being in control'

The Rt Rev'd Michael Langrish

Today is Passion Sunday. Passion – it's a word the root meaning of which is easily forgotten. It is the opposite of **action**. It denotes a state of being passive rather than active, of being 'done to' rather than oneself 'doing'; about receiving rather than giving. And as such the whole concept of passion is a challenge to the oldest and most persistent sin of humankind – the most basic failing to be the fully human beings we were created to be.

There was a series of British Gas ads in the 1990s featuring a number of celebrities, all asking the same question: *"Don't you just love being in control?"* It struck a chord; and for a while it was a catch phrase that you would hear being repeated all the time. Twenty-five years later basically the same message had the same widespread and deep appeal at the heart of the debate about the UK and the EU: *'Take Back Control'*. As a slogan it brilliantly went to the heart of what, all of us, in some way or other, instinctively desire – to take control of my own life, my own destiny, to be the sole arbiter of who I am, what I want, and what I am going to be.

"I want to be in control, and I believe that it is possible to so as well". 'Twas ever thus, so much so that it is at the heart of the story of Adam and Eve, the eating of the forbidden fruit and the fall, with the wily serpent whispering into those ancient human ears: *"when you eat of the forbidden fruit your eyes will be opened, and you will be like gods"* you will be your own arbiter of right and wrong, the sole shaper of your destiny, the monarch of all you survey. And how we like to believe, and act, as if this really were so. But from time to time things come along to pull us up short and to remind us that this myth of being in complete control is in reality nothing more than an illusion, an insubstantial will o' the wisp promising more than it can possibly convey.

And on this Passion Sunday how apparent now is that hard reality to us all. We are all, worldwide, in the grip of something over which, for the moment at least, we manifestly do not have full control. People feel helpless, and in the helplessness, they experience also anxiety and fear. For us today Passion – that experience of not being in control, of being handed over to something being done to - is not just an idea but something very real.

Even many of the things to which we have become accustomed to turn, in times of crisis and uncertainty, for support, reassurance, strength, are no longer there for us as they have been before. The rocks to which, as the waters threaten to engulf us, we have been able to cling – many of these are now being denied to us. No longer in control even of these. Among these, for we Christians, are our gatherings for public worship, and our access to the sacraments, so important to us in underpinning and sustaining our spiritual life, our walk with Christ.

Baptism, the rite of initiation into the life of Christ – banned except in emergency. The celebration of Holy Matrimony on hold. The ministry of reconciliation, the hearing of confessions severely restricted; and even the Eucharist as ‘the Lord’s people gathered around the Lord’s table on the Lord’s day’ – no more, at least in the form that we have known.

Since the ban on gathering for the public celebration of Holy Communion was announced my mind has kept going back to some wonderful words of Dom Gregory Dix in his book on the Eucharist: *‘Was ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done, in every conceivable human circumstance, for every conceivable human need from infancy and before it to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacle of earthly greatness to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth. Men have found no better thing than this’ ‘Do this in remembrance of me’* But now?

I have found myself asking: ‘Has the church ever before in history banned the gathering for the Eucharist as it is doing now?’ The answer is ‘Probably not’. And yet, I do reflect that there is one day of the year when the Eucharist may not be celebrated and that is Holy Saturday, the day that Christ descended into Hell, into the darkest depths, the furthest place from the Godhead. So maybe we have to see this period, even Easter Day itself this year, as part of an extended Holy Saturday exploring what it is to know that He is there with us no matter where, spiritually or physically, how helpless and out of control, we may be. Holy Saturday is, for me, the day of Passion par excellence. In contrast to Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Day – Holy Saturday is a curiosity. During the hours of daylight, we do nothing (liturgically) because there is nothing that can be done. Christ has died, he has yet to be raised. He is gone. But where?. As the Creed reminds us on this day *‘He descended to the dead’* the place where, by definition, not a single one of us is capable of being in control in any sense at all, a place where we are cut off from all that we have held dear – from others, from God, from love, and faith and hope. Yet it is precisely in that place of darkness, despair, passion, suffering, ‘being done to’ *in extremis*, that our Saviour is found, gathering lost souls to himself that they may be raised to new life, new love, new hope, with Him. His Passion, his suffering and ‘being done to’, is finished, but in our passion, our suffering, He is with us still, doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

The Passion of Christ – how powerfully that speaks to me today of the hell, the helplessness, the darkness through which so many feel that we are passing right now. It speaks to me first as a word of comfort and hope – of the ever-present prospect of life, love and hope, in and through Christ, even in the deepest pit of despair.

But this same Passion speaks to me – indeed to us all - as a word of challenge and of interrogation too: as to what we really think life is all about – challenging that ancient, ubiquitous and persistent myth that we can really, by ourselves, be in control. What our ancient parents in the Garden of Eden had their eyes blinded to, by the beguiling words of the serpent, was the truth that, in reality, there is an interconnectedness between all things, between us and the rest of the created order, us and other people, us and God. We ignore this at our peril or must face the fall from grace and the exponential impact of our folly and our sin which is the result. What the present crisis, along with the many others, great and small, that may affect our lives, can do for us is to jolt us out of the blindness and to open our eyes to this truth about the world which we share. For some people this **does** happen. The crisis becomes an eye opener; they do ‘get it’; and they both accept their own responsibility for being part of the answer and, at the same time, recognise the limitations on what any one of us, or group of us, on our own is really able to control. They come to see, that *‘In a truly healthy society, each person would see themselves as partly responsible for the whole of it, than wholly responsible for a part.’* For me one good sign of this has been the re-emergence of a partnership between politicians and experts, with a respect for the kind of knowledge and understanding that for which a University like Oxford is world famous, more so that has been apparent in the recent past.

But by contrast there are others who do not get it, whose stubbornly fixed view of the world is unchanged, determined that the myth of power and control should prevail. In a nutshell this was at the heart of the confrontation between Jesus and certain religious leaders in our Gospel reading just now. First it was a dispute about **truth**: a confrontation between an understanding of truth as something bigger than ourselves, in the light of which our cherished opinions and assured verities need to be re-examined and maybe changed, or truth as a world view, a set of values and cultural norms which we have created and which we control, even in the face of an uncomfortable reality which we would rather deny. Then this story showed us, too, vastly differing views about how people see the world and live their lives. What are we to make of that puzzling assertion of Jesus: *“Whoever keeps my word will never see death”*? His disputants assumed he was saying that followers of his teachings would not experience physical death. Not so! The particular word for *“see”* used here means *“pay special attention to”*, or *“give prime significance to”*, *‘be fixated on’*. What Jesus is actually saying is how easy it is for any of us to go through life focused on ‘death’ – worrying all the time about what is happening, or might happen, to us now and in the future, to the extent that we then, in effect, lose the capacity to see the opportunities for **life**, the real and true opportunities for flourishing - real flourishing - as humans, as disciples, as neighbours, as a church, as a community, as a nation, and for the flourishing of others around us as well - to live life to the full, as

the God and Father of us all intended that it should be. How pertinent is that challenge to us in our present troubled times now.

Then finally the biggest gulf of all, concerning how we do or do not understand **Christ** himself. During the Second World War the German theologian and pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was contemplating his final days in a concentration camp. Shortly before his execution he wrote this: *‘The thing that keeps coming back to me is ‘what is Christianity? And what is Christ for today?’*”

This is fundamentally the question that, in our Gospel passage, those priests and scribes fling back at Jesus about himself: *‘Just who do **you** think you are?’ Who do you claim to be?’* In response, he makes no claim for himself, but, as always turns people’s attention to the Father, to God. *‘I do not seek my own glory,’* he says *‘if I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies, he of whom you say, “He is our God”*

This is a the very opposite of just loving to be in control, believing that we can be the arbiters of our destiny, and act as Gods. This is the very stuff of Passion, and the very heart of the Gospel; from the annunciation *‘Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to thy will’* to the Garden of Gethsemane *‘Not my will but thine be done’* This is the way in which we, very particularly, are called to find ourselves as we approach Easter this year – not in control, not even able to walk forward, to extend our hands, to take his body and blood to ourselves, or open our mouths to say Amen – but simply being, as he was himself, **open**, in passionate obedience, **to the truth, the love, the life restoring, hope giving grace of God.**