

Homily at Mattins

Lent 5 (Passion Sunday) 07.04.2019

This is a true story. A friend of mine told me recently how he had run out of toothpaste. He did have one of those small tubes that you can pick up free in the dentist, so he used that. And then he then found a full-sized tube of toothpaste lurking in the bathroom cupboard that he hadn't previously noticed, so he then started on that. He didn't like it very much, so, after three days, he had a careful look at it and noticed the instruction on the side of the tube, which read: "*For veterinary use only*".

This may seem an odd way to begin a sermon on The Fifth Sunday in Lent, or Passion Sunday, but it does perhaps serve to remind us of how easy it is not to notice what is under our noses. I confess to being very prone to this tendency and am inclined to leave umbrellas, scarves, pairs of glasses – even mobile phones – lying around and sometimes losing them for good, as a result.

As today, we enter Passiontide, and approach Holy Week, we can fall into the same trap: we can so easily "not notice" and pass over the journey of the next two weeks (particularly Holy Week), without seriously engaging with what is offered by the church in these days. But the more we do so, especially by entering into the rhythm and richness of the liturgy from next Sunday, the more we will grow closer to Christ. I believe it is as simple as that.

And the more we grow closer to Christ, the more we grow closer to each other: a reality, not only for individual members of the church, but also in the search for full, visible unity *between* churches and indeed for dealing with the multiple divisions in society today.

And we are prepared for that on this - Passion Sunday. The scene is set for us in our second reading: the final struggle, from which Christ will emerge victorious. And, as we heard, this is accompanied by mounting opposition to Jesus, the emergence of the devil, rousing Judas to betrayal, and Our Lord's instructions to Peter and John to prepare for the Passover.

There are two significant points about this scene in Luke that I want to mention this morning, because they help us with that priceless opportunity of growing closer to Christ as we walk with him in the next two weeks.

The first is those instructions of Our Lord to two of his disciples to make preparations for the Passover.

In our Old Testament reading we encountered that pivotal moment when King Josiah, having rediscovered the Book of the Law (many of whose rules had become ignored) and then repaired the damage to the temple (which had fallen into a state of neglect), feels obliged to crown it all by celebrating the Passover. This was the ritual that brought to life the Exodus, a foundational event of their faith.

And – as we heard in our New Testament reading, Jesus' Passion is to take place at the time of the Passover, because he is on a journey to complete his own Exodus: his death and resurrection. The original Exodus liberated the Jewish people from slavery, but Our Lord's Exodus will liberate all who receive him Jew or Gentile into the freedom of life with him. This is the mind-blowing climax to the events of Holy Week and the more we engage with Holy Week, the more we will feel (at Easter) the overwhelming love that God has for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The second point I want to mention is that Luke alone of the Gospel writers sets these events in the context of a battle with Satan. You will remember that after Jesus had been tempted in the wilderness, we are told that the devil departed "*until an opportune time*". Well that time has now come and so the devil enters Judas's heart. But just as Jesus was victorious in the wilderness, so he will be victorious in Jerusalem in a few days' time.

This is Satan's full scale counter-attack and the betrayer is someone very close to Jesus who breaks their relationship of friendship and trust.

And so, the story of Our Lord's Passion should shake us out of complacency because, at times like this the devil likes to have a go at us too. There is that cartoon of the man building a boxing ring in his back garden and when his neighbour asks him why he is

doing so he replies: *“I have the family coming for Easter”*. The devil likes to undermine our own relationships and not least our relationship with Our Lord and he uses our “busy-ness” and tiredness to try and do so do so. But also, wherever the church is offering the beauty of holiness, he reckons we are worth worrying about.

And so, in the next two weeks we have a particularly special opportunity to grow closer to Christ. To see -and indeed feel - the overwhelming love that God has for us. But we need to remember that, even though the devil will be looking for an opportune time to spoil it all, the victory of Jesus that we will celebrate at Easter will reinforce, yet again, that Christ’s victory over death means that evil will never have the ultimate say.

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