

Good Friday Homily 2020  
St.Margaret of Antioch Leigh-on-Sea.

***No medal save eternal life.***

One of my predecessors in a former parish was a hard-working and eccentric soul much loved in the community, but sometimes treated with suspicion by other clergy – “what is he going to get me to do now?” One of my favourite stories of Fr. Ferraro Vicar of Heston West London, was when he invited a priest to preach the traditional three hour devotion on Good Friday. (This isn’t three hours by the way). The visitor was a little put out and disturbed when at the beginning having checked the congregation – Fr.Ferraro said to him well I’ll leave you to it and see you this evening.

He didn’t go home to put his feet up and listen to the radio and eat Hot Cross Buns, but pounded all the streets of the parish knocking on doors of parishioners enquiring if they were all right – because they weren’t in church – they must be sick!! Good Friday is central to our faith, life and culture – how could we not mark it? How would Fr.Ferraro cope with our situation today? Perhaps a drone in the sky to check up on you or a mini-call centre to enquire what you were doing or even a location app. I have no drone but do hope that you stay in touch with each other this weekend and mark this most special day.

Jesus’s crucifixion and death on the cross has given us a universal image and a new meaning to an instrument of Roman torture punishment and death. It is a powerful image that transcends branches of Christianity, other faiths and none. On one trip with the Royal Navy I happened to be in Turkey. The wife of a Turkish submarine commander asked: “what is this cross symbol?” I explained as concisely as possible to somebody who lived as a Muslim in the heart of the cradle of Christianity, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Oh she said that’s interesting – in my village (all Muslim of course) we use it a lot to ward off danger and evil.

On another occasion with a church group in Jerusalem we walked the via dolorosa with a made up cross of some old planks. Having walked the same streets that Jesus trod 2000 years before and struggled in the largely uninterested crowds doing their shopping and business, we left the cross by the church wall and went in for a short service. When we emerged that simple cross had like a magnet attracted a large group of folk making simple devotions in languages we could not understand. On the battlefield in my life as a chaplain with the Royal Navy and more often Marines I am always touched how guys, not normally religious, will throw up a simple cross from scraps to offer a focus for some prayer and a kind of protection.

It has been said that this pandemic is a great leveller – we are all at risk. In a sense that is true but it isn’t really – some are more at risk than others. The weak and

vulnerable, those in the world for whom self-isolation in a refugee camp or slum is a far off luxury. Those also who are on the “front line” are constantly at risk - our doctors nurse and carers. Jesus especially identifies throughout his life with such people whilst weeping and caring for all people. He puts himself on the front line against the darkest of forces for all people in all places.

In our culture, it is not surprising that the highest awards for valour, sacrifice and going beyond the call of duty are all in the form of a cross. At the top of course; the Victoria and George Crosses, then the conspicuous gallantry cross, military cross and others. These are for people who have put other’s lives before their own. We sometimes call them heroes though they will often say “I just did my duty” – this will have a resonance for many at this time. Not everyone can be awarded one and those that are will always make reference to those who supported them, were with them, and without whom they could not have done their duty.

So one person’s cross becomes one that others identify with and take pride in. For Christians there is something of this in our identifying with the cross of Christ - making the sign of the cross and owning it in a personal way. There is a double sidedness to our devotions and reflections today – we are the reason Jesus dies on the cross, perpetrators if you like, whenever we go against the laws and precepts of God. However, we are also victims carrying our own sorrows and burdens. Jesus at one and the same times forgives and identifies with us, not from afar, but from the inside more than any person can.

Jesus does not “get better” from the cross or walk away like some of the victims of Covid 19 so joyously do from intensive care. He dies. But through that death, a new life bursts forth not like a happy ending but a call to change, a call to light a call to love, forgiveness and a new community. That new life will come from a risen Christ, always wounded and scared but ever alive, not just in memory and nice thoughts but real power. It is not the cruelty of what is done to Jesus that makes this day unique – we sadly can all dream up more cruel ways to suffer. What is unique is **who he is** – God in pure love – his dying crimson flowing down like a robe of love for the world. **It is a love that wins for us not a medal but eternal life.**

The Corps prayer for the Royal Marines is short and ends in a line that has sustained many in the field of battle and its aftermath, I’m sure Fr.Ferraro would approve that Good Friday is at its very heart, allow me to pray it now.

Bestow your crown of righteousness upon all our efforts and endeavours and may our Laurels be those of gallantry and honour, loyalty and courage. We ask this in the name of Him whose courage never failed, our redeemer Jesus Christ. Amen.

***The Revd Fr.David Wylie RN  
Good Friday 2020***