**24th March 2013 Palm Sunday**

**Mark 11.1-10; 14.21-39**

Lindsay Hamon came to Dursley this week. He has spent over 30 years sharing Jesus on the streets, in pubs, clubs, Rock Festivals and in Secondary Schools seeking to help people find Jesus. The grandfather has crossed the globe with the 25kg cedar cross over 26 years, visiting places like New Zealand, South East Asia, Russia and Bangladesh to spread God’s word and has met thousands of people on his gruelling trail.

He’s says he’s happiest when he’s talking to people about the good news of Jesus with those who have never heard.

He says ‘I believe it’s often our own fear and lack of confidence in Jesus that prevents us from sharing God’s love on the streets. Carrying a life-sized cross is a great way to start up conversations. People often ask me, “Why are you carrying a cross?” I tell them, “The cross is the greatest symbol of how much God loves them.” The cross is a sign backing that up.

Many people today wear crosses. We are so used to seeing this that we are not shocked by it. We might be if someone wore a gallows or an electric chair on a chain! Why is the symbol of one of the most inhumane forms of execution so central to the Christian faith? Why does most of the New Testament concentrate on the death of Christ and what it means.

What would you say if someone said why the cross?

**The cross is a symbol of what is wrong with the world**.

**The world is an unjust place. It is unfair.**

Pilate put Jesus to death on a political charge because he felt Jesus was usurping the authority of Caesar in claiming to be Lord. In the passage prior to this morning’s one (Mark 10v44) Jesus threatened to overturn the political and social and economic structure of his day by insisting that ‘whoever wants to become great among you must be the slave of all’. Jesus - God - became servant of all. This threatened the establishment that believed themselves to be building earthly power based on their vision of heavenly power.

*Mark in his gospel details the major events of each day of Holy Week from the entrance on Palm Sunday to the resurrection the week later. The following day after Palm Sunday Mark 11 .15-19, Jesus cleanses the temple. He overturns the moneychanger’s tables and closes down the temple saying it should be a house of prayer for all nations but you have made it a cave or den, of robbers. Notice the wording – it is a den of robbers – not the place where the robbing is taking place – but where the robbers go to hide – to hide under the cover of religion.*

*The next day on the Tuesday, Mark records how Jesus was challenged over paying taxes to Caesar (Mark 12.13-17). Jesus looks at a coin and says give to Caesar what is Caesar’s but Give to God what belongs to God. For Jesus and many of his Jewish contemporaries everything belongs to God. The land belongs to God, not to local collaborators, not to Rome. What belongs to Caesar? The implication is nothing.*

*Further criticism is meted out to the scribes and religious rulers later in chapter 12 in verse 40 Jesus accuses them of eating up the property of widows whilst having a veneer of respectability. He then highlights the plight of the widow who gives all she has into the temple’s coffers as a criticism of the wealthy who give just a portion out of their great wealth. We are not all in this equally together.*

*Just a few examples and there are many more in Mark’s gospel in these chapters from Palm Sunday to Good Friday, where Jesus confronts the wealthy, the powerful and the privileged with the values of the kingdom of God. And they don’t like it and have this trouble maker and disturber of the peace put to death.*

Jesus was not crucified because he was a nice man and went round loving people. His love had a tough edge that challenged exploitation and corruption and injustice. He got involved in economics and politics. He was put to death on a political charge ‘claiming to be ‘the King of the Jews’.

**The cross reveals what is wrong with the world – but also what is wrong with me.** For within us we keep alive the passions that lead to war and hatred, jealousy and envy, lust and pride.

**The New Testament declares that Jesus died for our sins**

 ‘Sin’ is a complex idea. In scripture sin is an underlying state of alienation from God. It is like a flaw in human nature. The Bible claims that we are created in the image of God. There is a yearning in the human heart toward light, hope and truth. We can see that in people’s lives – even those who have a different faith or no faith. But there is also an evident failing or fallenness of humanity and the loss of our commitment to God, joy, life, light and beauty that makes people, desperate, unhappy and frustrated even wicked. The Bible talks about sin as a *falling short of the mark.* Sin is also described as an *enslaving force. Sin is like alienation.*

We have seen how Jesus confronted sin at the structural, society level. At a personal level it is experienced in many different ways:

anxiety about death; a sense of unfulfilled yearning; a sense of moral guilt; a sense of frustration that our highest ideals seem permanently beyond us; a desire to be totally independent from God, ignoring both his existence and his ways. At a social and structural leve and at a personal level sin expresses itself in the radical selfishness which characterises humanity. Self-interest expresses itself time and again. There is something seriously and radically wrong with humanity.

**The final thing that I want to suggest the cross is a symbol of that is wrong in the world is that it is a symbol of suffering and of death.**

In Mark account of the crucifixion Jesus hangs on the cross, one of the cruellest forms of torture devised by man – so cruel they invented a new word for it ‘excruciating’ - Jesus hangs on the cross and utters those words ‘my God , My God, why have you forsaken me’. Those who have faced suffering and death may identify with those remarks – God forsaken, why me? Don’t talk to me about a loving God, where is hope, is this life? It feels so wrong, so painful.

**But the cross whilst exposing what is wrong with us is also a sign of something positive.** That is why we call Friday ‘Good Friday’. Good came out of the cross of Christ.

**The bible declares that the worst that the powers of this world and the powers of evil could throw at Jesus was defeated on the cross. Jesus gained the victory over evil**.The resurrection of Jesus was God’s vindication of the way of Christ. Here was confirmation that this was the Son of God – he had shown the way to God. Sin, evil and death were defeated. All who follow Christ and make their stand for him will also win the victory in God’s purposes. That was the message from this wartime gospel of Mark. Love will conquer in the end.

Soldiers in Afghanistan have been decorated with medals this week. Revd Sam Davies was for a time the vicar at Uley but before that had been an army chaplain and a prisoner of War in Korea during the 1950s. He was awarded the MBE for staying behind with injured troops and so accepting inevitable capture. He proved a great source of strength to his comrades and refused to submit to intimidation by the camp authorities or undergo communist indoctrination. After one particularly savage beating of one of his fellow prisoners, Davies smuggled a slip of paper into his cell with his gruel on which he had written: ‘Great is love and it shall prevail’

This week is often called Passion Week. When refer to the Passion of Christ we commonly mean the suffering of Christ. A common question is ‘was it God’s will that Jesus should suffer?’ I don’t believe it is God’s will that anyone should suffer. Suffering happens because this world is free, fallen and sinful. That Jesus had to suffer is the consequence, the inevitable consequence, of him challenging the exploitation, oppression and injustice of his day, bringing in the kingdom of God whose values would always be in conflict with the values of the world.

In everyday English we also use the word Passion for any consuming interest, dedicated enthusiasm or concentrated commitment. The first passion of Jesus was the kingdom of God, the justice of God and the love of God for all.

In our bleakest moments, when we feel we have been wronged, or let down; bullied, unfairly treated, exploited, cast aside, the Passion of Christ calls us not to seek violent revenge but to go on loving, to persevere and hang on in faith. It will be hard and there may even be suffering involved. Like the slip of paper in the beaten up soldier’s gruel, we have to hold on to the belief that ‘great is love and it shall prevail’

**The Bible declares that Jesus died for the forgiveness of our sins**

If we are alienated from God, if there is a block in the relationship between us and God, how do we restore the relationship? If the world is in such a mess - what does God make of us? What will be God’s judgement on us? How can we be sure that God will forgive us and welcome us back?

When Jesus was crucified he forgave those who killed him (Luke 23 v34).

The cross of Christ is positive because its God’s way of bringing us back to himself by showing how much he loved the world - so much so that he was prepared to die for us (John 3 v16) and how willing he was to forgive us for making such a mess.

When I was out in New Zealand I met a Korean business man Harry Tan. Harry took every opportunity to share his faith in the cross of Christ in the world of his business contacts. One of his favourite stories was the Bridge:

There was once a bridge which spanned a large river. During most of the day the bridge sat with its length running up and down the river paralleled with the banks, allowing ships to pass thru freely on both sides of the bridge. But at certain times each day, a train would come along and the bridge would be turned sideways across the river, allowing a train to cross it. A switchman sat in a small shack on one side of the river where he operated the controls to turn the bridge and lock it into place as the train crossed.

One evening as the switchman was waiting for the last train of the day to come; he looked off into the distance thru the dimming twilight and caught sight of the train lights. He stepped to the control and waited until the train was within a prescribed distance when he was to turn the bridge. He turned the bridge into position, but, to his horror, he found the locking control did not work. If the bridge was not securely in position it would wobble back and forth at the ends when the train came onto it, causing the train to jump the track and go crashing into the river. This would be a passenger train with many people aboard. He let the bridge turn across the river, and hurried across the bridge to the other side of the river where there was a lever switch he could hold to operate the lock manually. He would have to hold the lever back firmly as the train crossed. He could hear the rumble of the train now, and he took hold of the lever and leaned backward to apply his weight to it, locking the bridge. He kept applying the pressure to keep the mechanism locked. Many lives depended on this man’s strength.

Then, coming across the bridge from the direction of his control shack, he heard a sound that made his blood run cold.

“Daddy, where are you?”

His four-year-old son was crossing the bridge to look for him. His first impulse was to cry out to the child, “Run! Run!” But the train was too close; the tiny legs would never make it across the bridge in time. The man almost left his lever to run and snatch up his son and carry him to safety. But he realised that he could not get back to the lever. Either the people on the train or his little son must die.

He took a moment to make his decision.

The train sped safely and swiftly on its way, and no one aboard was even aware of the tiny broken body thrown mercilessly into the river by the onrushing train. Nor were they aware of the pitiful figure of the sobbing man, still clinging tightly to the locking lever long after the train had passed. They did not see him walking home more slowly than he had ever walked: to tell his wife how their son had brutally died, and how broken hearted and distraught she was to hear of the sad news.

Harry comments:

‘if you can comprehend the emotions and agony which went through this man’s heart, you can begin to understand the feelings of our Father in Heaven when He sacrificed His Son to bridge the gap between us and eternal life. Can there be any wonder that He caused the earth to tremble and the skies to darken when His Son died?

**Finally, the Cross reveals the goodness of God**

**The Bible says Jesus suffered and died to save us**

*The cross shows that God is no stranger to pain and evil*. God does not allow us to go through what he himself avoids. He came face to face with concentrated evil in this world when he came among us in the person of Jesus. He has been where we are - the chief executive has experienced life on the shop floor, the chief of police has walked the beat.

God suffered in Christ. He knows what it is like to experience pain. He has travelled down that road of pain, abandonment, suffering and death. God is not like some alleged hero with feet of clay, who demands that others suffer, while remaining aloof from the world of pain himself.

We have an empty cross to emphasise resurrection and hope – fair enough. The Catholics of course have a crucifix emphasising the suffering of Christ and his identification with humanity. I have one in my study and I sometimes look at when I’m praying for people going through a hard time – and in asking the why questions and the where are you God, I can see Jesus eyes on the cross looking back at me.

 The cross can never be separated from the resurrection though. Because of the cross and resurrection we can be sure that God will not ultimately be defeated by evil and suffering, and neither will his followers. Suffering and evil, if this world was all there is, would be inexplicable and unjustifiable. But this world is not all there is. There is more – there’s plus – added value….

This week look again at the cross. What does it mean for you. How does Jesus save us on this cross. How can the death of one man so long ago free us now from our sin and all that is wrong in the world?

How does Jesus save you? Do you want him to?

That’s the power of the cross. It shows what is wrong in the world. But it also shows the goodness of God and the love of God that transforms everything.

May this week be a Holy Week for you all as you stand at the foot of the cross.

*Christ can take away from us all that stands between us and the perception of God’s love.*

*By his death he convinces us that God loves us.*

*By his resurrection that Death is defeated and that there is more to life. This hope is firm and sure.*

*By making us friends with God he can gradually, through God’s grace, turn our hearts from cynicism and callousness to love and gratitude.*

*By his example he inspires us to turn from destructive self-interest to the joy of self-sacrifice.*

*Salvation is the present action of God to overcome fear and contempt and self-regard, to bring us to reconciliation and fulfilment. It is a co-operative act, in which our response is a necessary part. Our response is to die to self and live for Christ, to let the risen Christ work in us by His Spirit, as the liberating power of God, present with us today in all things. In such a way we come to know the presence of the God who loves us, so much he came to die for us, and such love transforms us, our lives and our hopes.*