



21 March 2021
The 5th Sunday of Lent – Passion Sunday
Sermon – St James's Piccadilly
The Revd Dr John Russell

*May I speak in the name of God – Creator,
Christ and Holy Spirit.*

At the theological college where I lived in Mirfield for 3 years, we had 22 acres of the beautiful West Yorkshire countryside and woodland to wander around in. The grounds contained the monastery; an enormous church; the college buildings; a retreat house; even a derelict amphitheatre where Keir Hardie and Emmeline Pankhurst had once addressed political meetings, and the Mirfield-born actor Sir Patrick Stewart had made one of his earliest stage appearances.

And, being a monastery, there was also a Calvary garden with a cross with Jesus on. Now I was out in the grounds a lot. I love to pray outdoors when I can. I did yoga outside by the prayer labyrinth every morning, even in January when my toes would turn numb in the Yorkshire winter. But I didn't often go to the Calvary garden because, more than any other representation of the crucifixion that I have ever seen, the Mirfield Calvary was emphatically and undeniably a dead body hanging on the cross.

Because, in my experience, in most representations of the crucifixion, Jesus doesn't really look that dead. At the moment, I live just south of the river in Kennington, and I sometimes go to the Church of St John the Divine for daily mass. And there they have the Kelham Rood, a beautiful life-size sculpture of Christ on the Cross cast in bronze by Charles Sargeant Jagger in 1929. He's a very beefy muscular Christ, who has clearly prepared for the crucifixion with a few extra gym sessions to really pump up his pecs. His thick arms are lashed to the cross with rope, like Ulysses tied to the mast to resist the sirens. And he looks an absolute picture of enviably robust and vigorous health. He just looks a bit unhappy to be there on the Cross. He'd clearly rather be down the gym working on his bench press.

And I served my curacy at St Luke's Church in Chelsea, which behind the main altar had a huge larger-than-life reredos of the Descent of Christ from the Cross, painted by James Northcote in the 1820's. And we know Christ must be dead in that painting because he's being taken down from the

Cross but he doesn't really look very dead. Once again, he looks like a pretty fit and healthy guy, who could've crashed out after another strenuous gym session, and a quick whiff of smelling salts would quickly bring him round again.

But the Christ on the cross in the Mirfield Calvary garden is a thin emaciated figure, covered in the greenish patina of bronze exposed to the outdoor elements. The body hangs from the nails in his hands. The cheeks are sunken. The head lolls lifelessly to the side. There is no flicker of life remaining, and there is no intimation of the resurrection to come.

And each year, the Mirfield monks and students and guests began our Palm Sunday service by meeting together under that terrible cross, and we would begin our journey together through the Holy Week liturgy, our journey together through the valley of death into the joy of resurrection.

During Lent three years ago, my dad Terry died. Some of you have met my dad because he once came here to St James's to listen to me preach when I was the St James's ordinand-in-training, and he came to St Paul's Cathedral for my ordination and met some of you again there too. He was 76 when he died. He had always been very fit and active – but he was suddenly

diagnosed with acute aggressive leukaemia the previous year. He had undergone chemotherapy, and had a few months of remission before the leukaemia came back. Discharged from hospital, he received 5 days of excellent hospice-at-home care, before dying peacefully on a Friday evening, with me and my mum at his bedside. Over the previous few days, I'd watched him become more and more like the body on the cross at Mirfield. He lost weight rapidly. His cheeks became sunken. His skin turned yellowish. And, once he was fitted with a morphine syringe driver, he lost consciousness, and as he lay in bed in his final 24 hours, his head slowly collapsed completely into his right shoulder.

The nurses had told us that even though he'd stopped speaking, he could still hear everything so I'd been chatting away to him all day, saying Morning Prayer with him, talking to him about how I started clearing out the rubbish in the garage, telling him what my mum was cooking for dinner. And my mum and I were sitting at Dad's bedside as his breathing became suddenly much shallower and then stopped completely within about 5 minutes.

And then, there was a rather awkward darkly-comic period when we weren't entirely sure if he was dead or alive. Fortunately, our local GP came round

within 15 minutes to certify the death. And my mum and I stayed in the room, frozen with suspense in our chairs, holding each other's hands, while the GP looked for signs of life.

To do her examination, the doctor pulled the bedsheets right back, and my Dad's yellowish body, all covered in big dark bruises, was exposed under the unforgiving overhead light-bulb – and looking very, very dead indeed.

And in that moment, I remembered vividly the Christ on the Cross in the Calvary garden at Mirfield, looking so emaciated and broken and lifeless. And, although I had never liked that Cross, I suddenly felt immensely reassured by its awful resemblance to my Dad because I knew that Christ himself had been through a death like this, and had risen to a glorious new life, and was there now with my Dad and my mum and me, shining as a light on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.

And, after the GP had eventually confirmed Dad was indeed dead, the wonderful hospice nurses washed and dressed him so my mum and I saw him clean and back in his own clothes and looking quite peaceful before the funeral directors collected him.

And as we sat round the bed holding his bruised hands, which were still warm, my mum (who doesn't have a faith) asked me 'What do you think is happening to Dad now?' and I told her that I believed that at the point of death Christ the Good Shepherd meets each and every soul and invites them all into the glorious fullness of God's love, and I read aloud the prayer of commendation:

Terry, our companion in faith, the Lord who gave you to us is taking you to himself.

He who died for you and rose again from death is calling you to enjoy the peace of the heavenly city in which there is neither sorrow or pain, and where weakness is transformed into strength.

He comes to welcome you with angels and archangels and all his faithful people that you may know in its fullness the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Enter into the joy of your Lord and give glory to him, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

And as I finished the prayer my mum joined in with a definite and very touching Amen.

For this is what we do as Christian people. Though we may stand in the shadow of death, we despair not. And, although we remember and grieve for the loved ones that we have lost, we also trust that it is okay to die; because death is not the end, and the faithful departed are safe with God,

surrounded by love; and, one day, we will be reunited with them in the eternal glory of God's heavenly kingdom. We have confidence in this because we have heard and believed the story of Christ's victory over death, And we are very shortly to enter once again into our annual retelling of the paschal mystery of Christ's passion, death and resurrection.

Today is the Fifth Sunday of Lent, also known as Passion Sunday – which marks the beginning of Passiontide that leads us quickly towards Holy Week. The Holy Week liturgies are the most important church services in the Christian calendar. Everything will look a bit different this year as we continue to gradually emerge from lockdown but despite the restrictions do try to come to as much as you can, whether that is in-person or online, and immerse yourself as fully as possible in the whole story once again.

- On Palm Sunday, we will have a shared reading of the gospel.
- From Monday to Friday, we livestream Holding the Silence for Holy Week at 12 noon on YouTube.
- On Tuesday evening we have our Zoom Eucharist, with Mariama offering us a special Holy Week reflection.
- On Maundy Thursday, we will have a watch of prayer until 10pm.

- On Good Friday, we will mediate together for 3 hours upon the 7 last words from the Cross.
- On Holy Saturday, there will be evening prayer.
- And then at dawn on Easter Day, come and hear the good news that Jesus the Christ is Risen from the dead.

Share together in the dying of Christ, and share in his resurrection. Do not flinch from the scandalous horror of the cross and let Good Friday be as awful as you can allow it to be, so that the joy of Easter is all the more glorious and you know that God's redeeming love reaches into the very darkest corners of hell. And poised as we are between earth and heaven, amidst the mystery of our suffering, of the suffering of those we love, and having walked together in the wilderness of a global pandemic for over a year, we will reaffirm our faith in God's joyful promise to put right every wrong, heal all sadness, hurt, and the fracture of sin, so that none of it will be wasted.

Amen.