



**Sunday of the Passion, Year B – April 5, 2009**

### **An Exhortation to the Keeping of Holy Week**

I don't like where this is going. Because, you see, there is the smell of death in the air. And fear. (Have you ever smelt fear?) I don't like the herd instinct that possesses this crowd, and I especially don't like the fact that I have got hemmed in on every side, and have about as much chance of breaking free, as a teaspoon of water has to turn back a tidal wave.

I have good reason for my reticence. Because this procession, led by the fellow up there on the donkey, is travelling a direct route through Hell. He will go, and I must watch him, through every agony that has ever wrenched the human soul. Betrayal — to be offered up by those you thought loved you. Fear — sweaty palmed, dry-mouthed, cold-handed, gut-quivering fear. Denial — at bottom, the discovery that you are a source of embarrassment, too much trouble, for your friends. Mockery — to be laughed at, and publicly humiliated. Pain — the short, sharp, searing kind, and the tenaciously relentless God-when-will-it-stop kind. And abandonment — to be alone at the hour of death, to feel oneself forsaken even by God. What else *is* there?

I don't like where this is going. And yet, I submit, it is better to be in this crowd, than not in it. Even if I never meant to be here. Even if I came for questionable reasons: I was curious about what was going on over here, I thought it might be a good show. Better to be part of the story, than read about it later. Now that I am here, better I should stay than leave.

Because here is the thing. The point of this whole week, this seven-day drama, which we call the Passion of Christ, is that our God is about to travel all the places we would do anything to avoid. Betrayal, fear, mockery, pain ... he is about to go there. Not carried along by the crowd, as we are, but leading the procession. Jesus will go to every dark corner of human experience, and leave behind a valence for grace. That is, he will redeem them, make of them pivots upon which light can shine out of darkness, and life can come from death. So that when our own journeys take us to hell (as they sometimes do), there will be a way back out again. Do you see, then, that Jesus isn't doing this for his sake, but for ours. It is a journey undertaken, therefore, for love. Which is why we speak of the *Passion* of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is also why, for love, we need to be there. Jesus will go for us, but he ought not to have to go alone. It is not possible to overstate the importance of this week for Christians. The truth is there *is* no Christianity without Holy Week. And so, I am asking you, as the person to whom you have entrusted the religious commitment and spiritual vitality of this community, to be there. Stay with the crowd, and keep your eyes on Jesus. Come Thursday. Come Friday. Come Saturday. If you have never done this before, ask someone who has. It is a life-changing experience, an immersion into the mystery of our faith, that for some, connects with their deepest reality for the first time in their lives. But you have to be there.

I ask of you one other thing. And that is for each of us to come knowing what are the dark corners of our own souls that Jesus needs to visit and transform. It is to face ourselves honestly, and so come to the Easter Banquet in grateful recognition that Christ's Journey wasn't to St Elsewhere, but Here, wasn't about everybody else's

sin and brokenness, but ours, and mine. For most, it is enough simply to believe that God welcomes our penitence, and to accept the general assurance of pardon which the church provides in its weekly liturgy. For some, however, it isn't so easy. Sometimes our failings feel too big for our usual remedies. Sometimes, our failings are little as can be, but they have this way of sticking to us, of not leaving us alone. It is for such as these that the Church offers a rite of sacramental confession, or reconciliation — a word of forgiveness as specific as our sins, and best of all, grace to amend our lives. Let me reiterate the Anglican rule about Confession: All may. None must. Some should. It is a ministry which is probably more widely used than you think. Clergy expect to provide it, and I am happy to explain to anyone how it works, and also, to suggest the names of neighbouring priests whose experience commends them as confessors.

I don't like where this procession is headed any more than you do. But I'm here now, and I trust the One on the donkey, and I'm going. Come with me.