

## Transcript of Lent 5

Croeso and welcome to this reflection for the fifth Sunday of Lent, sometimes called Passion Sunday.

That's because we begin to anticipate the Way of the Cross, the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. And our readings have that feel of anticipating what is to come. Jeremiah chapter 31, verses 31 to 34, where God speaks of his determination to forgive our failures and wrongdoings, and St. John's gospel, chapter 12, verses 20 to 33, where Jesus sees in his growing fame and popularity, the beginnings of his end. Foreigners to the Jewish faith, and to Israel, come requesting to meet Jesus. He's the talk of the festival and the city of Jerusalem. But Jesus knew that such interest would only lead him on the road to Golgotha. "The hour has come", he declares.

Last week, someone sent me a photo of "Reflecting Absence", which are the huge granite basins which stand on the spot where the Twin Towers, the World Trade Center once stood. I've actually visited this memorial Plaza in Manhattan, and know that it is indeed a solemn place. Many of those who were killed on that day were crushed into the ground. So these dark walls have their names engraved on them, and in the centre, as water falls, it then disappears down a further square space, a void, as if vanishing into nothingness. When this design, I suppose we would call it a memorial water sculpture, when the design was first proposed those responsible for deciding what should happen there, modified the proposal, and they added some 400 trees around the great voids, making the experience of them a little less bleak, and proclaiming life, growth, renewal and rebirth. Even in the very embodiment of mourning, there's the affirmation of life.

Because this is Passion Sunday, and we start to turn our faces to the cross of Christ, I chose as the theme for today in our series on endurance, enduring death. Of all the things that we find ourselves enduring loss and dying is, of course, the most certain and possibly the most difficult. It also happens to be that this weekend, it coincides with the anniversary of the very first lockdown, of our start of the COVID virus. The charity Marie Curie, who do such an important work supporting the bereaved have invited us to use this anniversary as a national day of reflection for us to remember those who died in this last year, whether of COVID or of some other cause, and especially to remind ourselves of all those who are bereaved. The charity calculates that more than 3 million people in the UK have had some direct experience of grief in this one punishing year. And so they invite us on Tuesday, March the 23<sup>rd</sup> to reflect with a minute's silence at midday, with daffodils in our windows and for us to stand on our doorsteps with candles. A reflection. There will be sadness for those lost to us. There will be regrets of the way we've said goodbye. And there will be unresolved feelings that are still hurting as we reflect as a nation on a year of endurance, of enduring death. Let us also reflect on what the Christian view of death tells us and be ready to offer it to our neighbors. For in it, there is eternal hope. The best is yet to come.

Three Christian convictions on which we might reflect this week. Firstly, that every life is unique and special. As he considers his own death, Jesus in that passage from St. John says, "My soul is troubled". The loss of any life is painfully troubling, and most deaths change the lives of those around them. Just as New York treats the ground of 9/11 as a sacred Memorial, so we treat the mortal remains of every individual with a sense of their sanctity. For a number of years, I served on the Government's

Advisory Committee for the commemoration of World War One. And I came to admire the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. In every corner of the globe, the remains of those who served their country are honored: no discrimination is made. Whether these people were rich or poor, known nor unknown, mere privates or generals, every life, every death is so precious, and thus profoundly painful.

Following from that regard for the sanctity of human life, made in the image of God, we Christians believe that wherever possible, people should die with dignity. Jesus said, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself". And he said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. We know that the manner of Jesus's dying was vicious and humiliating, demeaning, because it was both public, and meant to be a warning to others. And we know too, that many of the deaths of this last year have been unbearably cruel. The kind of death matters, and no one should travel their journey to death, alone, or afraid, away from their loved ones. But that declaration, 'I will draw all people to myself', also promises the third element of Christian hope in our dying. We are not immortal creatures. From dust we come, unto dust we shall return. We're not reincarnated creatures. When we are dead, we are truly dead, until God raises us from the dead as he raised Jesus from his grave, and conquered the final enemy, which is death itself. Our hope lies not in our nature, as immortal or reincarnated, our hope lies only in God.

Now not everyone will share our faith in that resurrection hope. But here then is what we believe: that no death is insignificant. It is right that we reflect, remember, and we celebrate the lives lost in this last so cruel year. That no death should be without dignity. And we do well to plan well for dignified and loving farewells wherever we can. And no death leads to immortality. In our human weakness, we rely utterly on the resurrection power of Jesus's victory over sin and death.

So as our nation reflects in these days, and has to live with some deeply painful experiences, let us proclaim once again, that which we know to be true, that good is stronger than evil. Love is stronger than hate. Light is stronger than darkness, and life is stronger than death. And in death, victory is ours, through Him who loves us. Let us thank God this week for those who have died in the faith of Christ, knowing that victory, and let us hold on to the conviction, the habit of living with eternal life, pressing on through the Way of the Cross, to the hope of resurrection

Amen.