

Passion Sunday 2020.

This is the very first of my recorded Sunday Masses and sermons. I would do them live, but I have no internet connection from my chapel. I do my best to bring you a shadow of Christian worship according to the ancient Use of Sarum together with a glimmer of light in our dark times.

We are going through something very serious because of a highly contagious virus. If we catch it and it doesn't kill us, we might pass it to someone we love who might then suffer respiratory failure and death. We are responsible for others as for ourselves. This pandemic and the restrictions we are having to live with strangely correspond with Lent which started on 26th February. The danger becomes the more intense now that we enter Passiontide. This year will remain in our memories, because we will survive if we carefully follow our quarantine and hygiene gestures. We will face many difficulties and our paradigm of life is likely to change radically. We have to be true to ourselves to live through this trial and allow God to make the best of it for us.

This is now the fifth Sunday of Lent, also called Passion Sunday. We no longer say or sing the *Gloria Patri* at the *Officium* of the Mass or after the Psalms in the Office. This Sunday's Mass is dominated by this turn in the Lenten period from our preparation by prayer and fasting to this remembrance of the Passion of Christ. For the next fortnight, the Church will evoke the ever growing hatred of the Sanhedrin and the Pharisees towards Christ. The Office of the Mass appeals to divine justice and Christ's vindication through his resurrection.

Give sentence with me, O God, and defend my cause against the ungodly people : O deliver me from the deceitful and wicked man, for thou art the God of my strength. O send out thy light and thy truth that they may lead me : and bring me unto thy holy hill and to thy dwelling.

In the collect, we ask God to look after his family the Church. St Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews brings out the typology of the Old Testament in relation to the Sacrifice of the Temple which would be fully realised by Christ's offering of himself on the Cross. This is the full meaning of the veil of the Temple being rent in twain as he died on the Cross.

As we begin to take in the depth of human wickedness, our Paschal joy will be all the more glorious. The wicked words and deeds of the Sanhedrin will now be multiplied. They will go as far as accusing Jesus of being possessed by an evil spirit. The Gospel of St John relates the accusations. Christ answers the accusations head-on, showing the perfidious bad faith of the accusers. The best the accusers could do was to attempt a stoning. It was not yet the hour of Christ, and so he walked away free.

Why did such hatred mount up against Christ who had done no harm to anyone? In particular he uttered the most profound truth about himself as the incarnate Word: *Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I AM.* Christ's enemies knew exactly what he was talking about, and wanted him dead for it. This marks the real beginning of the Passion. These words are so explicit about Christ's divinity that he could only be telling the truth - otherwise he was suffering from some serious mental condition or this was the Devil speaking. These three possibilities are so radical that the choice is clear. If we believe that Christ is God, then we have no choice other than making a clear commitment.

A word of caution for those willing to die for this commitment and ideal, take from Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*:

Fear prophets, Adso, and those prepared to die for the truth, for as a rule they make many others die with them, often before them, at times instead of them.

This is something we have seen with religious and political fanaticism, an illusion

and a sickness of the spirit. At the same time, this expression of truth cannot leave us indifferent. However, truth – a notion that will figure in this Passiontide – is beyond our possession. It is the *Sehnsucht* or the symbolic *Blue Flower* for which we yearn. This kind of truth is much greater and higher than any of us. In the Sanhedrin and the Pharisees, we will see many of the spiritual diseases that have afflicted Christians too since the Church became an institution. “*We have the truth!*” “*We are right!*” “*Red Team beats Blue Team and takes all!*” Metaphysical truth is of another order.

The idea of before a person who lived thousands of years before I did, *I am* – is extraordinary. In grammatical terms, it is an error of tense. However, in philosophical terms, Abraham lived in history, and Christ is outside time. He is eternal as we all are in spiritual terms. Christ’s enemies knew something about philosophy and language because they were educated men. What they could not accept was a man claiming to be at the same time a person in this world and the eternal God. He was surely blaspheming or mad. The only other possibility was that he was telling the truth. The choice is as radical as that.

In the history of all religions, mystics have had to be careful to speak of their *relationship* with God and not to *identify* with God. This was the first rule Christ broke when speaking to the clergy of the Temple. Mystical strands of Judaism and Christianity have tolerated the idea of *affinity* between God and ourselves. Jesus was treated as a *heretic* by the Jewish clergy, and the Church would continue in this tradition via the Inquisition. For the Jews, no living being could be the one unknown God whose name was utterable only once a year by the High Priest in the Holy of Holies. By saying “*I am*”, Jesus is saying the same thing as God the Father to Moses “*I am who am*”, expressed in Hebrew as *Yahweh*. There is also the notion “*I am he*” as a self-identification.

In addition to Christ’s affirming his divinity, it is also an idea that each of us has of our identity. It was Descartes in the seventeenth century who said *Cogito, ergo sum*, literally translated: *I think, therefore I am*. This is a principle of epistemology, the

theory of knowledge in philosophy, especially of the notion of truth. This being of God, of Jesus, of ourselves brings us to a stillness and permanence that changing and conflicting life disturbs.

This revelation by Christ is the very centre of our contemplation of his Passion and the way each of us accepts or refuses. "I am" is the centre of our own self-knowledge coming from Christ's. He also uttered "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, you will know that I am". We indeed know, because he rose from the dead.