

# *undergoing paschal mystery*

a sermon preached on the

## *Passion Sunday of the Palms*

20 March 2016

at

### *st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

*by fr david moore, vicar*

the lections: Philippians 2:5-11, Luke 19:28-40, Luke 22:14-23:56

Holy Week offers us the greatest of spiritual resources, everything condensed into a one-week pilgrimage. Yet as with all things religious, these spiritual resources are at great risk of being thwarted, even by we who desire to practice them in good faith. This is the strange paradox of institutional religion. We forget that religion, and all religious rituals and dogmas and texts, are the products of raw encounter with the Divine – not the other way around!

Because of this amnesia, the keeping of religious practices – especially within the context of a religious institution – so readily supplants the necessity for encounter, substituting God for the manageable safety of religious ideas, rituals, Bibles and prayer books, institutional order, and so on. This is what all the great prophets of Israel – echoed again and again by Jesus<sup>1</sup> – warned against.

Holy Week is of no earthly use if it merely confirms the setting in concrete of certain historical propositions, institutional arrangements, approved texts. The point of the Paschal Mystery is not to accept it as an idea to be defended. And certainly not to simply support a religious institution with its many demands.

Rather, the point is to *do it*, to undergo it ourselves. The Pascha is to be experienced. We, too, must go the same way as the Christ. I am not exempt. I dare not merely talk *about* Christ. What use is it to us, to paraphrase Meister Eckhart, if Christ is crucified and rises, if we do not also undergo the same crucifixion and resurrection? Everything we hear and do this week is only of any use, if it supports each of us in the task of undergoing ourselves the Christ way.<sup>2</sup>

Certain crucial aspects of this Christ way are revealed in Holy Week.

Crowds are gripped by that mirage which is the delusory assurance of numbers – as today's 'Hosannas' poignantly illustrate.<sup>3</sup> But the Christ resists all such grasping at false assurance.

The crowds, the collective, want him to be their king,<sup>4</sup> the Messiah with the sword, to conquer Rome. But the Christ resists the regressive forces of the collective: in order to be liberated in the truth;<sup>5</sup> to abide in Love.<sup>6</sup>

Crowds imagine that the world can be changed by getting a whole mob of people together. Christ resists this illusion, walking alone to Golgotha.

Crucially, crowds want someone else to do for them what individuals ought to do for themselves. Christ resists this infantile urge, and tells them that they too must take up a cross and do what he does.<sup>7</sup>

Such resistance to the mentality of the collective – including the collective we call Church – is the very essence of the Paschal Mystery. Because the collective, including the church collective, tends to be asleep, unconscious. The collective tends to be regressive, looking backwards with rose-coloured glasses to an imaged golden age, a Garden of Eden.

The Christ reveals that only an individual who is sufficiently conscious is able to resist the regressive unconsciousness of the collective – and thus give birth to something truly new.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 23:1-36

<sup>2</sup> John 14:12

<sup>3</sup> Mark 11:10; Matthew 23:9; John 12:13

<sup>4</sup> John 6:15

<sup>5</sup> John 8:32

<sup>6</sup> John 14,15

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 10:38, 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23

Furthermore, this is only possible via the apparent annihilation of what we would now call the false self, a self-focussed ego,<sup>8</sup> in a terrifying encounter with the complete absence of meaning and existence<sup>9</sup> – which in the imagery of our tradition is the deep darkness which descends on Holy Thursday after the meal,<sup>10</sup> extending through Good Friday and Holy Saturday, that darkness penetrated with Easter dawn's first light.

It hardly needs to be pointed out that the price required to go this way is the highest price there is! That's the Paschal Mystery: "Those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will find their life / soul *yuch psyche*".<sup>11</sup>

Such is the world of difference between actually undergoing the Paschal Mystery, compared with merely 'believing in' certain historical and dogmatic propositions and belonging to an institutional structure called 'church'. Believing in historical and dogmatic propositions actually costs very little. Whereas doing it, undergoing the Pascha, costs not less than everything.<sup>12</sup> It may cost our reputation, our work, our identity, our friends.<sup>13</sup> It may require us to let go of the one thing we feel we cannot.<sup>14</sup> It will certainly require us to face the one deepest and darkest part of ourselves which we have refused to own,<sup>15</sup> and which we have projected onto others.<sup>16</sup> It may require us to take a stand against some things – or for some other things – a stand that could have the effect of completely rearranging our life and our relationships. It may even require us to let go of the too-small faith which has sustained us this far, in order to receive the much-larger inheritance God desires for us.

Well, I dare not merely *talk* about these things. Like you, I must *undergo* this also. I, too, must consciously and willingly descend into the grave with Christ, into the Nothing, the Abyss in which in fact all life is generated. From the point of view of ego consciousness, this is without doubt a very real death.

That is the cost of following Christ.<sup>17</sup> This is not child's play! Not rational belief in historical or dogmatic propositions or institutional life, but *actually dying* that we may rise. The purpose of Holy Week and the sacred Easter Triduum is to initiate us again and again into that momentous undergoing – in whatever particular and unique form it might take for each of us this year.

May Christ be our companion in this great undergoing – that we may have no fear, but live in the truth and liberty, the love, hope and joy of the Paschal Mystery.

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<sup>8</sup> Luke 22:42

<sup>9</sup> Mark 15:34, Matthew 27:46

<sup>10</sup> John 13:30

<sup>11</sup> Luke 8:24

<sup>12</sup> The expression of T S Eliot in Four Quartets

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 10:37-39, Luke 14:25-27; Matthew 8:18-22, Luke 9:57-62

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 13:44-46

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 6:6; Luke 18:9-14

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 7:3-5; Luke 6:41-42

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 20:20-28, Luke 10:35-45