

Today we recall the suffering and death of Jesus, mindful of the Gospel statement:

*“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*

We cannot be certain when or how the story of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus was first received here in Wales. From the mists of time comes a tale that when the first Christian story tellers came to these parts, they were welcomed by seers who declared they'd been waiting for this story to arrive and be told among them. They had a premonition that due to an event far away, something had changed, as never before. Echoes of another story about a star which drove Persian Magi to travel west on a quest to find its meaning, and discover a child's birth in Bethlehem of Judea. Something changed in the universe, in the unseen depths of life due to one person. Something changed making possible a new way of understanding the meaning of life and the universe beyond and within ourselves.

Since time immemorial people gazed at the cosmos with wonder, seeking to learn more about our existence. Philosophy and science have grappled with questions about the origins, purpose and destiny of the universe and us within it as conscious beings. The more we learn, the more wonderment there is, but we know little more about who we are, what life is for, unless we have received the key to open our minds. A key enabling us to embrace the whole, to discern and experience truth beyond mere information, beyond all theory and ideas.

Jesus, whom we proclaim as Lord is we believe this key. His story reveals him to be One in whom God dwells in human flesh, unique Son of the eternal Father, divine Word of the Creator of all that exists. Each phrase is immensely potent, and needs reckoning with. Such language is less than familiar as part of the vocabulary of modern life, nor is it always fully grasped in religious talk. It arises from the belief Jesus inspired in his disciples. It wasn't what Jesus taught that inspired such belief in him. It wasn't what he claimed about himself. The Gospels portray him claiming very little about himself. That was something others did. He forbade witnesses to speak openly about his healing miracles. The evangelists invite us to consider Jesus and ask

'What do you think?', 'Who is he?' A question as alive for us today as when it was first posed about him. We use those exalted confessional phrases about him, in prayer and hymnody. How much do they mean to us? Do they resonate with conviction in our hearts? What we think about Jesus matters for it is connected to what we think about ourselves.

Before the evangelists pieced together Jesus' ministry as a framework for recounting his teaching and miracles, the story of his death and what followed, stood first at the centre of all his disciples said or did. In their experience, that Jerusalem Passover Eve when he died, the direction of history changed for ever. Does this ring true for us? The story of Jesus goes back just two thousand years. The most ancient myth and symbolism telling stories about our selves dates back ten thousand years. Set against the 15 billion years of creation, Jesus is a newcomer in the history of time. He's still news, with fresh impact on our self-understanding. The letter to the Hebrews regards his coming as - '*in the fullness of time*' a moment in our social, moral and spiritual development, when conditions were perfectly right for a change of direction and consciousness in the human race.

Six centuries before Jesus, awareness of personal individuality and responsibility emerged. You can see it in ancient literature and holy scripture. Call it the birth of soul awareness, personhood. In Jesus' passion every facet of his personhood, is put to the test, to the point of destruction. Although mistreated and killed, he does not lose his humanity. Though damaged to the limit by the evil deeds of others, He remains flawless, a person from whom we can discover what being human and true to oneself means. By such testing Jesus is revealed to be the supreme example of faithfulness to God. One who shows us *the way to truth and to life*. Who he is for us matters.

We live in an era of de-construction, of rationalist culture that examines everything and denies there is a golden thread of meaning to interpret anything coherently by. Humankind, having come of age is claimed to need gods or God no longer. Jesus is passed off as the imaginary friend, beloved of small children at play. Nowadays there is no need to resort to notions of transcendence or religion to make life meaningful or good. Religious claims, it is said, can't be proved. Their usefulness in human

progress is doubtful maybe harmful – ideas the world is evolving away from, so runs the argument. Religion is accused of denying the truth of scientific findings, and of falsifying understanding of reality. And we must be honest and acknowledge there are types of religion that do this, that allow themselves to be used as a cloak for ill-doing. It was ever thus so. This is not what brings us together on this unique day of the year. Refusal of value to all religion, denies the spiritual dimension of life reducing it to reason and emotion. It is disbelief, as opposed to those honest life companions, doubt and faith. There have always been people who see religion as some kind of folly or illusion. It's nothing new. But the story we tell is not about religion, it's about Jesus. St Paul writes *“The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miracles and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.”*

This is bold rhetoric. It's not – 'argument weak, shout louder'. It rests on a conviction, of the objective reality of God and spiritual life. For Paul, the crucifixion is when the nature of the unseen, eternal, creator is made known in Jesus' endurance of betrayal, suffering, shame and death. All that might rob Jesus of his humanity fails to do so. What sustains him is loving, being held in love by his Father. A rare kind of love. The Cross tests belief to the limit. It turns upside down all former notions of divine power and justice. It reveals that trust in divine love is the source of real life, material or spiritual. All the exalted things we say of Jesus point us back to the Cross, inviting us to consider - Is this true? Who is this man? What kind of man is he? His story reveals as much about us as it does him.

When He arrived at Jerusalem for the last time, the crowds welcomed him because of

his reputation as a healer, his bold criticism of religious hypocrisy, and his inspiring teaching about God's compassion and generosity. They looked to him with hope. They sought meaning in lives crushed by Roman oppression, poverty and religious practice that seemed to make life harder rather than easier to live joyfully. Some in the crowd may have wondered if Jesus might make a better religious leader. Others wondered if he was attracting attention as a potential catalyst of resistance against the armies of occupation. For every one overjoyed with anticipation of interesting times before them, another harboured anxiety and resentment. For religious leaders, Jesus threatened to undermine all they'd strived to preserve of Jewish autonomy and way of life under the colonial yoke. He was man for all to watch carefully.

As far as occupying security forces were concerned, the crowd could call him 'King' or anything else they liked. He was harmless enough in their eyes, riding his donkey - no swords or spears in sight, no banners or flags to suggest incitement to disorder. Just a few coats and palm branches strewn around. He was a brief distraction, relief from the sullen, resentful mood emanating from crowds - everything was under their firm control to prevent trouble breaking out.

When Jesus went to the Temple to pray, he was appalled by the invasion of quiet holy precincts by money changers and sacrificial animal traders, He brought disorder and disruption by overturning their tables, driving them out, reclaiming God's forecourt as '*a house of prayer for every nation*', quoting from the prophet Isaiah. It seems a crazy thing to do in such tense circumstances. But the security forces took no notice, didn't intervene. The Temple was out of bounds to them as part of a peaceful co-existence deal with Jewish authority. It had its own Jewish police force. Jesus embarrasses them and the Temple officials, arguing scripture with him to justify his action. No harm is done, except to pride and profit. The status quo could be restored when he is gone. But to those who reading his intentions a big statement has been made. Although he is steeped in Jewish tradition, Jesus also rises above it. He draws inspiration from the visionaries before him who saw Jerusalem as a place of pilgrimage for all the world. He teaches that God's compassion and mercy is for all humankind, this holy place is a World Heritage site before its time. But at what price would his inclusive welcoming

vision be achieved?

Days earlier, as he approached the city he lamented over it. *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing”* Anything he attempted in that setting was risky and dangerous.

Volatile crowds has their eyes on him. Religious authorities knew his reputation and were uncertain, fearful of what he might do to upset the balance of power they strived to maintain. Yet Jesus put his life on the line to make this city out of longing to make it what God intends it to be, though few might understand or appreciate it until later. For him, it's not a matter of 'kill and be killed', but accepting and enduring violence, suffering rather than causing others to suffer, for the sake of the great coming change that has the power to transform the world and all human relationships.