

Good Friday 2015

St Chad's Birmingham

Come with me to Jerusalem 2000 years ago. "Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has 5 porticoes. In there, lay many invalids – blind, lame and paralysed. One man was there who had been ill for 28 years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him "Do you want to be made well?" The sick man answered him, "I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me!" I have no man, no man strong enough, agile enough, determined enough to get me through the crush, the mad rush.

But towards noon on this Friday, this Sabbath eve, Pilate had Jesus scourged, crowned with thorns. Jesus then came out before the bawling, Jerusalem, mob, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe; and Pilate said: "Behold the man. He, in his weakness, with the power only of compassion and mercy will get you into the waters of healing and life, stirring because of love and for love.

And of this Jesus, the Nazarene, this King of the Jews, a letter written to the Hebrews, to his own people, declares "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever! Or, in his own words, spoken at any time, in any place, before today, before all your yesterdays, and in tomorrow and in all your tomorrows I am: not I was, or will be, but **I am**.

So when on this miniscule planet, in an insignificant corner, of a pretty ordinary version of a galaxy among billions of galaxies, conditions of blindness, paralysis, hardness of heart drive a Charles Dickens to write a tale called Oliver Twist or compose a Christmas Carol, to be read, sung in myriads of forms, and when, across the Channel, a Victor Hugo is compelled to write Les Miserables to become drama in music, year after year confronting millions with the question: "Will you join in our crusade", while in that same era the powerful, and rich sojourned in Harrogate or at a leisurely pace glided in their plush carriages to Bath, or Leamington Spa or Colorado Springs to find healing waters, one day a sickly, insignificant daughter of a feckless, bankrupt miller would be drawn to a grotty, rubbish strewn cave on the banks of the River Gave in Lourdes. And her shining eyes were eyes to see an unassuming, simply robed, smiling lady pointing to a trickle of muddy water; but thanks to tiny Bernadette Soubirous, one of God's grains of wheat, that trickle was transformed into a spring of healing, forgiveness, boundless joy dance and song. For gracious lady is mother of him acclaimed this day: Behold the man: and on this day at this hour she takes her stand and with John, her new and first of countless new beloved sons and daughters, sees a spring gush forth from his pierced side, unto eternal life, a torrent of wine for irrepressible joy.

The love-broken heart of Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and for ever:
before and after Lourdes: I am.

But since that holy night when his mother first laid his body, his tiny limbs bound in
swaddling bands, on a wooden bread-wheat feeding trough, for his bed:

“with the woes of sin and strife
the world has suffered long;
beneath the angel-strain have rolled
two thousand years of wrong;
and man at war with man, hears not
the love song which they bring;
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
and hear the angels sing!

A hundred years ago, the cries of the infant God broke through the noise. For once,
the the strains of *Stiile Nacht* whispered across corpse strewn trenches and bone-
chilling mud of Flanders poppy fields.

Despite that Great War, a war to end all wars from 1914 until now there have been
World War II; and Vietnam and Falklands and bombs here on terrible night in
Birmingham and Enniskillen, and Balkans and Afghanistan and Iraq One and Two
and Congo and Rwanda and Central America, and Boko Haram and IS and Gaza
and Ukraine. What waters can cleanse so much blood, transform so many foul seed
beds for revenge and hostility? What commission of enquiry could come up with an
idea, behaviour adequately to change attitudes and words and deeds? Where shall
we find a man, someone soldier enough, General enough to accomplish a victory of
total, definitive, enduring armistice?

A courteous, unassuming, white haired, old German man, called Benedict would
show us: would say:

“God is love... not an idea, not an ethical choice but the encounter with an event, a
person which gives life a new horizon and decisive direction.” And when this wise,
loving, perfect gentleman discerns: today needs another: that other, called Francis
will insist: “I will never get tired of repeating those words of Benedict XVI which lead
us to the very centre of the Gospel. In other words: with one voice, rooted in one
faith Benedict and Francis acclaim: Behold the Man.

And so to the afternoon of 3 April 2015: to St Chad's, Birmingham. We have come pleading from hearts into which the Holy Spirit has poured the love with which God who is love, loves all that is. So between us with sighs too deep for words we offer up hopeless situations, unmerited catastrophes, personal calamities, serious illness or lives immersed in a hopeless sense of guilt. Where can we find integrity, a mercy, a raising up, a Saviour to uncover and bring an end to the awful network of fate and guilt, injustice and lies? Who will clear the world of error, banish disease, drive out hunger, unlock prisons, grant travellers safety, pilgrims return, health to the sick, salvation to the dying?

But Jesus Christ is the name yesterday and today and forever: he declares before and after this Good Friday I am.

So in communion with Francis our pope, at one with every minister of the Joy of the Gospel, who has surrendered their heart to the pierced heart of Mary's and God's Son, Archbishop Bernard, from the very depth of his being will declare: "Behold the Wood of the Cross: Behold the Lamb of God." That is: Behold the Man. We shall stumble creep our way forward and kiss and adore and be healed. Encouraged by David Saint and the choir we shall survey the wondrous cross, and choose to abide in Jesus' heart and wounded side.

So, all too soon, as we leave God, love, buried in a garden tomb we shall be embraced by this whispered blessing and carried into the Great Silence of Holy Saturday:

"May abundant blessing, O Lord we pray,
descend upon your people,
who have honoured the death of your Son
in the hope of their resurrection:
may pardon come,
comfort be given,
holy faith increase,
and everlasting redemption be made secure.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.