

BIBLE READING: John 18: 1-12; 19:25-37

SERMON

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger... Luke 2:6,7

As we have just heard, when he died he was again wrapped up by others - this time in a shroud.

At the beginning of his life and at the end like us all he was naked, vulnerable and completely reliant on others. He could do nothing for himself.

We come into the world like this - exposed - this is how God gives us as a gift to ourselves and to the world. And we go back to God at the end having nothing, owning nothing, hiding behind nothing. This is how we give ourselves as a Gift to God.

Today Good Friday we have heard again how Jesus died. It was a very difficult and cruel death - but it was a good one. And in this Jesus is teaching us how to die.

Why? In order that we may live.

An old wise monk once said to a group of trainee teachers: "Teach [your students] about death and how to die well, and then they will know about life and how to live well."

Our life is like a piece of Music. It starts off quietly - not in the sense that the baby doesn't cause quite a stir as it enters the world - but in the sense that it has no power and then as time passes and we begin to express ourselves, our lives become more varied and interesting. We learn new skills. We develop talents. We form relationships. And in some form or another, or many forms we begin to exercise power over others as a parent, as a boss or supervisor, as a teacher of the young, as coach or captain of a sports team - and in all these things we find our self expression and much joy.

Life is louder and more exciting in places - and then we peak. Like the music it reaches a crescendo or has many crescendos. After that we begin to have to let things go, as we age things get quieter.

We have to begin letting things go - our sight, our hearing, our walk, our health, our friends and eventually - and all these other examples of letting go have been a rehearsal for this - we have to let go of ourselves. We end as we started. This is how nature does things. It prepares us gently for that day when we have to go back to God as we came from Him - with nothing, completely reliant on Him.

Of course it is not as tidy as all that. It wasn't for Jesus and isn't for many of us. Illness, accidents, rejection in love, even death will come to some of us long before old age and we will struggle. Doubts. Anger. Sadness, Questions. Why is this happening? And to me? What have I done to deserve this? Are all natural reactions.

What we are reminded today is that Jesus has been in that place too. He knows what it feels like. And he showed us what we must do. We can struggle against what life has done to us. And in a sense we must as for example when ill, we must seek healing.

But when we have done all we can then we must place ourselves in God's hands to be lift up and out of it. Otherwise we will sink beneath the waves of darkness and despair.

I have had a number of experiences of accompanying people as they died and seeing others as they prepared to depart this world. For some it is a gentle letting go. For others it is very difficult.

Some of the people who have the worst time were people who had always been in charge. Not in a bad sense. This was their duty - their reason for living, but often I have found these are the ones who find it the hardest to die. Having always been responsible and in charge maybe it was harder to hand over. I don't know. On the other hand people who had simpler lives and always had lived for others without being in control of those others seem to go easier.

What I am saying is we have to start practising dying very early on in life.

When children leave home, when a relationship hasn't worked out, when a project has failed, when we have been misjudged - In all these things there is nothing we can do to make things better and we are faced with a choice remain angry and resentful, having tantrums that we did not get our own way or gracefully letting go and trusting that God has us in his grasp and will not let us sink beneath what we are now suffering.

Christ himself went through all this in his life - submitting himself to the authority of others - to Mary and Joseph and the authorities of the time. He was misunderstood by his peers; misjudged by the society of the time; endured the terrible emotional pain of rejection; the spiritual pain of feeling his Father had forgotten Him, as well as the physical pain inflicted by his fellow humans - and eventually death - at their hands.

His message to us? There will be times in your life when some of this will happen to you. Keep faith with God. Put your trust in Him. Even though you walk in the valley of darkness He will lead you through it. Jesus has been there before you and triumphed. It will not have the last say over you.

This is why you must all come back Easter Sunday. This is not the end of the story today. The story for us is the Resurrection of Jesus which is our Resurrection also.