

THE CRUCIFIED KING

Palm Sunday

St Michael Cornhill

Sung Eucharist

Sunday March 20th 2016

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First, just a few lines of verse:

“ ‘This is a brightsome blaze, you’ve lit, good friend, tonight!’

‘ – Aye, it has been the bleakest spring I have felt for years,

And nought compares with cloven logs to keep alight:

I buy them bargain cheap at the executioners,

As I dwell near; and they wanted the crosses out of sight

By Passover, not to affront the eyes of visitors.

‘Yes, they’re from the crucifixions last week-ending

At Kranion. We can sometimes use the poles again,

But they get split by the nails, and ‘tis quicker work than mending

To knock together new; though the uprights now and then

Serve twice when they’re let stand. But if a feast’s impending,

As lately, you’re to tidy up for the comer’s ken.’ ”

These lines are from a short verse by Thomas Hardy – rather unlikely, you might think? After all, Hardy, with his pessimistic take on human life is often seen as the classical example of Victorian agnosticism – even atheism by some. But – and having studied Hardy perhaps more than’s good for me – I can assure you there’s more to Hardy and religion than meet the eye. Still, in the year before his death, at the age of 88, Hardy would cycle over to Stinsford from his house, Max Gate, for Evensong.

Hardy was, of course, a most rigorous observer and student of humanity and the human condition. He uses every ounce of his powerful imagination to plumb the depths of our experience and existence. Even the landscape itself tells the story. So, for example, in ‘Tess of the D’Urbevelles’, which he sub-titles ‘A Pure Woman’, Hardy uses these powers to the full. The Frome Valley, west of Dorchester in Dorset, is painted in lush tones to describe Tess’ moments of profound happiness and fulfilment. Flintcomb Ash, itself aptly named, a poor infertile farm high on the chalk uplands, he describes as a ‘starve-acre’ place: here Tess is at her lowest in happiness and self-esteem. The black smoke of a steam threshing machine points to the evil of her tempter speaking nearby. Finally Stonehenge and the great slab of sacrifice points to her tragic demise.

In this poem, however, reflecting on the crucifixion, Hardy captures some of the pathos, but also ultimately the hope of Palm Sunday. For today, which is the gateway into Holy Week, is itself riven with ambiguity. The tale itself would be worthy of being part of a Hardy novel. The Palm Gospel, with which we began, starts with the fairly unremarkable journey of Jesus and his closest friends into the little village of Bethphage, just on the eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives. It’s just a tiny distance from Jerusalem and the Temple Mount, the focus of ancient Israel’s religious cult.

Jesus sends two of his group ahead to procure a beast -variously described as a colt and an ass. Clearly it’s meant to be the lowliest beast of burden, hardly the steed or stallion of a conquering emperor. In front of him palm branches are strewn – not purple cloth, silk or velvet edged with ermine. The donkey itself, as a beast of burden, has a cross marked out on its back –

another powerful sign. Its physical shape and stance is itself a parody of a noble steed, as G.K.Chesterton notes in his well-known poem, *The Donkey*.

So, as Jesus enters Jerusalem, on this gateway into Holy Week, all the signs are of ambiguity. The manner of entrance is of a king, but the beast he rides is the humblest possible; the garlanding and salutation are not sumptuous, but simply leaves from the nearby palms; the back of the beast has no embroidered saddle but is instead marked with a cross.

Hardy's poem captures all this. It had been a bleak spring but the logs will offer warmth and blazing light. But the logs are re-used instruments of death and torture. His poem ends:

“ ‘Though only three were impaled, you may know it didn't
pass off
So quietly as was wont? That Galilee carpenter's son
Who boasted he was a king, incensed the rabble to scoff;
I heard the noise from my garden. This piece is the one he was
on....
Yes, it blazes up well if lit with a few dry chips and shroff;
And it's worthless for much else, what with cuts and stains
thereon.' ”

All the same ambiguity is there, in the rhythm and melody of this gateway day. Dusty the road, humble the beast, tatty the leaves, yet Jesus is still the King. 'The cross blazes up well,' Hardy notes. But we must wait until after Friday next until the fire of the cross explodes into Resurrection.

Amen

Readings

Isaiah. 50. 4-9a

Phil. 2. 5-11.

Luke. 19. 28-40 (Luke 22. 14-23)