

Sermon: St Andrew, Corbridge Passion Sunday/Giving Commitment Sunday 2024

May the words of my lips and the thought of our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I wonder how you picture Jesus? Many of us have strong images from children's Bible stories, stained glass windows, or films we have watched. I'm sure most of us think of Jesus as about 30 years old, with long dark hair and a beard, a long robe and sandals. Perhaps we picture him as a white man as if from Corbridge rather than Middle Eastern as he surely was. How do you picture his eyes? I sense they would be penetrating – Jesus sees through to the real person, our goodness, and the shadow side of us that we are so good at hiding. And yet, I sense his eyes don't judge us, but implore us, invite us, to grow in goodness and restrain the shadow. Most of all his eyes look upon us in love, in compassion, in affirmation. I wonder, does he smile at us, a warm, welcoming smile? Do you think of him as merely human? Or does he shine with divine glory? Is he radiant, beautiful, awesome? How do you picture his hands? Are they extended towards you in welcome, in invitation – 'Come to me and I will give you rest'. Are his palms open towards us? Do you notice the scars on his hands, where once he was pierced? Look down at his feet – do you picture the scars there? We might think of the words of Charles Wesley in his great Advent hymn – 'With what rapture gaze we on those glorious scars'.

You see, while Jesus is risen, he carries for eternity the marks of his passion. He is eternally the crucified one. I'm fascinated by St Paul's words in 1 Corinthians, on which Bishop Mark Tanner preached on my Induction service here in 2018, 'We preach Christ crucified'. 'I determined to know nothing among you but Jesus Christ and him crucified'. This is not to say that the resurrection meant nothing to St Paul. Quite the contrary, later in the same letter he reminds us that if Christ is not risen, our faith is in vain. But for Paul, it is the cross that stands at the centre; it is the cross, the self-sacrifice of the Son of God on behalf of the human race, that is the heart of his preaching. Not only is the Cross, the greatest demonstration of the love of God towards us, the love of the Father and the Son, but from the cross flow forgiveness, life, reconciliation, healing and peace. The Cross is the giving up of the life of the only Son of God so that life may be given freely to all who come under its shadow.

Jesus stands among us here in St Andrew's this morning. However you picture him, he is here, in the midst of us. And he stands before us with arms outstretched – he

shows us his hands and his feet. He speaks to us his living word – the words we have just heard in the Gospel reading, and very shortly we will take blessed bread and wine – as into our hands, mouths, our poor, mortal, dying, frail bodies he gives himself to us; we feast on his sacrifice, we receive all the benefits of his saving passion; his divine life is taken into the deepest parts of our physicality. On earth, we eat and drink the bread of life and the cup of salvation.

I love the image in today's Gospel reading – that phrase beloved of St John, that on the cross Jesus is *lifted up*. It is a profound pun. Victims of crucifixion were indeed lifted from the earth, nailed to a tree. But for John, the verb lifted has a second and primary meaning. It means exalted, raised high. For John the Cross is like a royal throne which Jesus ascends. From it the world's King reigns. And the cross begins a process of exaltation and ascension, so that when Jesus appears on Easter Day to Mary Magdalene, he says, 'Do not cling to me, for I ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'

I picture Jesus, standing here today among, as filling the whole space of this building, lifted up before us, for above him, there is no other; his sacrifice ends all sacrifice, his death deals with all death, all sin, all wrong. And that is why we worship him today with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Today is our Giving Commitment Sunday. At the end of worship, there is a letter waiting for all members of this Church Family. **And the first thing I want to do is thank you, for everything you to give to the life of this Church, your time, gifts and today especially the money you give to sustain God's Church here in Corbridge.** As we approach a new tax year, I invite you prayerfully and Christianly to review your giving to God through the ministry of St Andrew's and Halton and to support our Take 5 Charities to whom we give 10% of our regular giving. We shouldn't be afraid to talk about money in the Church. Jesus said a lot about it. For example, he accepted the love and financial support from wealthy people like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea and the group of wealthy women who supported him and his disciples in their itinerant ministry. He rejoiced in the poor widow who put a mere two pence into the Temple offertory – 'You see that woman – she gave all she had, all she had to live on'. He tried to set free the rich young man who had made money his god. Now Jesus was no stingy Puritan. I believed he enjoyed the good things of life as God's gift, but he also saw the dangers of the love of money, of the misuse of money.

Christian giving is a broad concept. We can give God our love, our gifts and talents, our time and energy, our acts of loving service. And we can give of our substance. May I mention one or two specifics? We know that inflation has been high over the last year; it affects us personally and it affects our Church. In April because of inflation, the Diocese graciously gave stipendiary clergy, myself and Sam, a 5% rise in our stipend because of inflation. In November, the PCC agreed that we would raise our Parish Share which pays for stipends, clergy pensions, and our contribution to the work of the Diocese of Newcastle by 5%. This means in 2024 we pay £84K, in Parish share or £1,600 per week before any of the costs of our Church, its ministry and buildings. But we are also supporting some of the poorest parishes in our diocese so that they also can have a paid priest. So, I am inviting everyone who belongs to this Church to prayerfully consider whether you might raise your giving by 5%. Here is my mobile and today I will amend my standing order. I'm not asking anyone to do what I won't do myself. I hope everyone is giving something— it's not an optional-extra; it is central to discipleship. It is part of our worship. Could everyone please return the confidential response form to our Treasurer, whatever your response. We need to plan our finances carefully in challenging days. And if you pay tax, please Gift Aid your giving and Mr Hunt, the Chancellor, in his generosity will repay us your hard-earned tax raising your gift by 25% at the cost of a signature. Please respond. When we honour God, I know we receive many blessings in return. Jesus stands among us. We behold the glorious scars of his passion. What can we give him? Our hearts, our love, our gifts, our time and part of our material substance. We give as worship.