

## Sermon for Lent 5 Passion Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> March 2016

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Passion. If you have ever found yourself in the happy position of having to write a Personal Statement for an application for university (or accompanied a loved one on this special journey...) you will know that there are definite guidelines for how to do this most effectively. A Personal Statement is the opportunity to "sell" yourself to the university or college you want to attend. They are designed to help you "stand out from the crowd." They are pretty stressful and guidelines are helpful, and most are fairly straightforward, not to say obvious: "Do check your spelling" and "Don't copy your sister's who read astrophysics if you want to do catering etc." But some are less obvious. Students are advised by the universities not to use the word with which I began this sermon. Passion. Passion is a banned word. As are passionate and passionately. Their use in such Personal Statement passages as: "Music is my passion." "Dentistry is my passion" "The study of the Corn Laws is my passion" "Writing personal statements is my..." has been seen as overdone, and now rings not necessarily untrue but rather hollow. Find a better way of describing this, the instructions now advise students: *show don't tell*. That is, demonstrate your love of your subject by evidence and example not just by words. Show don't tell your passion.

Passion. The way we are using the word today is rather different to the way it is used on most UCAS forms. The way we use the word Passion in the Christian tradition is to describe the death by crucifixion of Jesus. Today, two weeks before Easter, we begin Passiontide. Our focus shifts from the penitence of Lent to the spiritual preparation for all that Easter holds. Next week on Palm Sunday we shall hear St Luke's Passion, that is the Gospel of St Luke's account of the death of Jesus, and on Good Friday we shall hear St John's Passion and enter into the events of that day as we venerate the cross and remember Christ's passion.

So, Passion. The root of the word's meaning is the Greek word *pathos* meaning to suffer and to endure. Only from the sixteenth century does it take on its romantic note of passionate love affairs, and later still the sense of violent engagement with the National Curriculum shared in university applications. But outside these walls it is these resonances of passion - love affairs and deep attachments - that will I think sound louder than the way we shall use it today.

The different weight the word holds is salutary for all of us who live to share the message of Christ in our world. Finding the right words is important and making sure they mean the same to us as the person we are talking to is a problem for the Church. No matter to those we speak to that any power the word passion has comes from what happened on Good Friday. Few have found Christ through a dictionary. Show don't tell.

Showing not telling is what happens in our Gospel today. Jesus knows that the end of his earthly ministry is coming. And before the end begins he goes to the home of his friends Lazarus, Martha and Mary in Bethany. We have met them before. We know from earlier accounts that Martha gets frustrated when her sister Mary does not help her in



the house. We know, astonishingly, that Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead. And we also know that Mary loves to sit at Jesus' feet to listen and to love. And this we imagine is what she has been doing when Jesus comes to Bethany for one last visit. We do not know what the discussion around the dinner table was. We can guess I think it was about the gathering plot to kill Jesus. We learn in the previous chapter that the chief priests and Pharisees have given orders that anyone who knows where Jesus is should let them know so that they can arrest him. I do not think we are wrong to imagine lots of words, of telling, around this table. Lots of the disciples telling Jesus what they think. But at Bethany Jesus is not in hiding but in waiting. Waiting for the time to come.

Mary recognises the coming time and, it seems, all that it will hold. Wordlessly, the Gospel tells us, "Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume". Mary responds to what is to come by showing her love and her care and understanding of where Jesus goes from Bethany. Her act of overflowing gifts is misunderstood by those around her – notably Judas, whose mind is on such other things that Mary's act must be unbearable – but Jesus recognises what she has done. Preparing for his burial. She alone of his followers, it seems, has seen how the week will end. In Passion.

These last two weeks before Easter while we reflect on Christ's Passion let us also think about what our response is. What in our lives has the fragrance that Mary shared with Jesus? What of him is there in our lives that fills a room with its richness and its beauty? What overwhelming loveliness of response is ours to share with others? For we can have no greater passion, in all its meanings, than to demonstrate in evidence and example Christ at work in us. So this Passiontide if we are to use words what words should we use to tell others about Jesus? More, what can we *show* them of the difference, the truly passionate difference he has made to us.

**Amen**