**GOOD FRIDAY 2020**

**JESUS SAID: IT IS ACCOMPLISHED ( JN 19:30)**

Those of us who have lived in Jerusalem have a ready imaginative access to the Mount of Olives. It is easy to envisage what a crowd following Jesus on a donkey would have looked like two thousand years ago. They must have known him well, for he was famous in Galilee and had made a huge impression in Judea- the country round Jerusalem. He had been preaching and doing miracles. He had been in dispute with Pharisees and Scribes. And he had made a triumphant entry to the Temple. The scene was set for a major encounter with the aristocratic high priests who ran the Temple. Indeed in many ways the Temple was Jerusalem. That temple then had been in the process of being built for 46 years. It was said that when it was finished in 63 A.D. ,fourteen thousand men were out of work. (And of course it only existed in its completed form for seven years before the Romans destroyed it in 70 A.D.). It was an enormous and magnificent place. It was one of the seven wonders of the world. The apostles were fascinated by it and said so. To this day the setting is magnificent. The Golden Dome of the Mosque of Omar tops the Holy of Holies of the Temple of Solomon. The place is the same. The building is different. All is magnificent.

**The Power and the Glory**

Jesus had come to the Temple. The crowds expected extraordinary things. They sang and waved flags (palm branches and clothing) and accompanied him. Had they thought they had a glorious Messiah, that their troubles were over, that he would liberate them from their misery? It is hard to avoid that expectation. And there is one major piece in this drama that remains true. He was glorious, but not in the way they anticipated. He had done wonderful things. He had gone to Jerusalem to make a very wonderful gesture. He had cleansed the Temple. And he was allowed to do so and walked away with none laying a finger on him. But in doing so he was writing his death warrant. And he knew it. And that of course is what the crowd could not understand- as the rest of the Passion Narrative describes. He was arrested shortly afterwards and condemned to death.

What is clear is that the drama being played out on Good Friday is on a grand scale. As the Gospel we have just heard showed us: this setting is no backwater, no private little fight, but the encounter of the humblest with the most powerful, of right with might, of the good and the bad, of colony and empire, of heaven and earth. This is about every aspect of every human and social life anywhere in the world since the beginning of human existence. And it will mirror it in some way until the close of history. It is a Passion Narrative. It is the account of dreadful suffering. It explains why the suffering takes place, and how the principal personages involved figure in the drama. At the top of the social tree in that drama socially speaking, is the prefect, Pilate, the representative of the Roman Empire in Palestine. The best comparison for us today is probably to think about America. America is the most powerful nation the world has ever known. Its power is everywhere. In the first century the Roman Empire dominated the whole world. And it lasted longer than any other recorded empire in history. It was almost at its height when our drama took place. Locally in Palestine the High Priests- these were the Sadducees, were at the top of the Jewish social tree. They were rich aristocrats working in collusion with the Romans. The Temple was their area of activity. They oversaw all local administration and liaised with the Romans on what was and was not possible. The one thing they wanted was calm- no rebels to ruin their good relationships with the Romans who probably despised them anyway. Among these Jewish rulers we would find some highly placed Pharisees. The Pharisees generally were the interpreters of law. They had given Jesus much trouble in Galilee and they continued to have no love for him; indeed they wanted him dead long since. The crowd were on the side of Jesus first. After all he had been responsible for so much healing and so many cures, manifesting sympathy of all kinds; he had represented their desires and sympathised with their aspirations for a decent life. The vast majority of the auditors of Jesus were not well off. Such were those who had surrounded him with palm branches and had strewn their clothing beneath his feet. For them he was a hero; and they had had a triumph. A short lived one, but nonetheless real for that. When suffering became central they abandoned him. They had only wanted it removed; they did not have any interest in what it meant to accept it.

**Ourselves**

But why do we Christians commemorate all that and continue to engage in the drama liturgically? Is it just a major exercise in imagination? Like commemorating Armistice Day on Nov 11th? What are we supposed to put into it and get out of it? The fact is that it makes us think of all the most important things that make up our lives. What Jesus was doing in going into Jerusalem was to unfold the true nature of existence- what it means to be a human being, what it is to live in society, what it is to care for the way the world is run,what it is to belong to God. He was an individual in a normal society. He lived in an ordinary family. He followed an ordinary existence for most of his life; he experienced the best and the worst that life can give. He is God’s living commentary on what it all means, what is right in it, what is wrong with it, and what can be done about it. Suffering should be alleviated. One must stand for principles. Worship must not be commercial. Laws must not be coercive and destructive. Public servants should serve the public good. Little people are not to be exploited. God made the world for solidarity, for truth and justice. Ultimately it is all about love.

There is a price to be paid for these principles. And Jesus pays that price. It is a lonely world when you stand for those principles. And the whole narrative showed how Jesus stood alone after the initial triumph. The contrast could not have been greater.

**Conclusion**

But we in the Church have each other, and he is with us. Together we can bear what is asked of us, and love what is true and do what is right. We engage in this drama together. Until the restrictions imposed by the corona virus, we processed together; we prayed together. We call each other brothers and sisters. We are a community. And with all the other communities right around the world we are all spiritually engaging in this same ritual with the same intent right now. God is in Christ reconciling the world to himself. That is the meaning of Good Friday. It really is Good. Only in English is it called Good! It must be an extraordinarily important word for us.

Rev Richard