**Exeter Cathedral**

**Passion Sunday 2020**

In February, I attended a conference in the USA at which we enacted a Eucharist for the Eve of the Epiphany as it was celebrated in Exeter Cathedral around the year 1400. It provoked strong reactions, mainly unease at a service where only the priest-president received communion. Who could have guessed that a month later, this would be the new normal?!

In parallel with that, I had many lively conversations with a dear friend, a University Chaplain in the US about the Church, about the relationship between the Church and the Gospel. The Church, with its rich and inspirational traditions of public worship, music, art, architecture, teaching, structure and order exists with complete integrity and legitimacy. But the Gospel, of loving God and neighbour, of finding Jesus in the poor, the outcast; ministry to the ungodly and unlovely; giving away all that one has; putting aside brother, mother and family; of taking up one’s Cross, of giving oneself away, of losing one’s life to save it. All of that, for the Church and Churchgoers, is often, it seems, an optional extra.

For all of us at the Cathedral, this is a perplexing time, as we work out what it means to be a church without magnificent building, paens from the organ, a rousing Sanctus from the Choir. But it does give us the opportunity to more deeply engage with the Gospel. What does it mean to love God and love neighbour, to serve those on the edge, to prioritise others before self and family? Church has effectively stopped. What’s left is prayer and the Gospel, or to put it another way, Faith, Hope and Love. That’s a huge challenge for all of us, particularly Precentors. Without Liturgy and Music, I’m having to rethink priesthood all over again!

Here, standing alone, there is a remarkable intimacy in my prayers to God, just as there was in the mediaeval enactment last month. The only thing I can do that is remotely effective for any of us this morning is to pray. We have to try to develop a new solidarity in our prayers.

In the Eucharist, a sacrament we have come to view as a shared meal, we have to develop a wider understand as the meeting place of heaven and earth, a sacrifice that takes us away from our shared community life, and back into that older understanding of God here in the world, a cause for reverence and awe, of the Church as a prayerful and awe-struck community.

I think also offers opportunity for deeper self-examination and growth. Next weekend, we should have been hearing our choir singing Bach’s St Matthew Passion. Frankly I cannot wait to see and hear them again – standing the choir down was one of the most heart-breaking moments of my life. And they are, in so many ways, the beating heart of our Cathedral, perhaps more than they, or we, have realised.

Bach’s St Matthew Passion – the opening chorus of which I played before this service – picks up on Matthew’s distinctive voice, as he constantly asks “who is Jesus”? Bach’s and his librettist “Picander” are remarkable, is in their exploration of Jesus’ trial – in German term “Anfechtung”. Anfechtung is a trial not just in the legal sense, but a temptation, an endurance, a suffering that transforms, a trial in the more heroic, even mythic sense. It’s a trial that, in the Matthew Passion, all of the arias describe from the perspective of different characters, Peter, Mary Magdalen etc and how it shapes them. Watching Jesus endure the Passion provides them, and all of us, the opportunity to examine our lives and to enter a period of “Anfechtung”, of trial, with him.

Entering into the spirit of Jesus’ trial is the focus of Passiontide. This Passiontide, we have been presented with the most astonishing – and astonishingly unsettling – opportunity to enter into the “Anfechtung” of Jesus. Deprived of the usual trappings of Church and Religion, and stuck in our homes, we are left with the bare bones of prayer underpinning our Faith, Hope and Love.

But we are also seeing an astonishing outpouring of the Gospel: half-a-million people volunteering to serve the NHS, of group chats by new mediums that are keeping us connected to each other, and serving one another as best we can, of video and telephone conferencing that is both productive and fun, a renewed appreciation for public servants and for those who bring food to our shops and homes.

Our trial this Passiontide is, I suspect, not to ask “what would Jesus do?”, for in a time of Pandemic that is fairly clear: Jesus would heal. Rather, our trial is to work out what sort of people are we, and what sort of people might we become through this? That will be our own Anfechtung. As a Church, my hope is that priesthood will become a little more mediaeval, that clergy become less preoccupied with managerialism, congregational targets and pleasing a crowd, and a bit more focussed on prayer. My hope for the whole Church is that it will become a bit more attuned to the Gospel, that it will become less introspective and more interested in nurturing, perpetuating and growing the remarkable new sense of community and appreciation of our whole society that we have seen emerge within a few, extraordinary days.

Above all, I hope we will be able to learn something of the isolation of the Cross from our isolations, and, like the Cross, use it to transform ourselves and thence the world. Once our isolation is over, our worship and the music of the choir and organ will be all the sweeter, as they encourage us in our new vocations and ministries.

At the end of this service, I will play an aria from the St Matthew Passion, “Mach dich mein Hertze, rein” which I’ll provide a link to it on the Facebook page. I will conclude with its text, and its challenge to us. It encourages us to identify closely with Jesus. Without the usual activities of church to preoccupy us, it sets a challenge for all of us this Passiontide. It translates:

Make yourself pure, my heart,

I want to bury Jesus myself.
For from now on he shall have in me,

forever and ever,
his sweet rest.
World, get out, let Jesus in!

Amen. J Mustard. 29 March 2020