**SERMON FOR LENT 5 | 21.03.2021**

**Jeremiah 31: 31-34; 1 Peter 4: 12-17,19; St John 12: 23-33**

**It all started with a call from my bank: *had I bought £1,054 worth of stuff from Sports Direct?* *Just look at me, was that likely* I was tempted to say! But the fraud department of my bank is always spot on and so we went through the usual routine of cancelling my debit card and they said it would take 3-5days for a new one to come through.**

**And so I thought no more of it - until my supermarket declined my grocery delivery on Friday morning because the debit card had been stopped. Stupidly I hadn’t remembered to change the payment method. Giving the details of a second debit card didn’t work either because the other bank’s fraud squad also refused payment because I never use their card for my online shopping! After a further hour of sharing various passwords and codes to a series of people on the other end of the phone - it was all too late: my grocery delivery was cancelled too!**

**I tell this story because we all go through such frustrations – getting annoyed as we listen to automated voices saying *our lines are very busy at present as our staff attend to other customers.*’ But it is a First World problem and an hour later of course I had stopped being cross – except with myself for getting so disproportionately angry! For goodness sake…**

**And yet these things do get to us. The busier we become, the more such small glitches seem to get under our skin. It is the same lack of patience that Jonah had when he was all hot and bothered in Nineveh and God raised a small plant to give him some shade - only to take it away again the next day because Jonah needed to be taught a lesson for being ungrateful.**

**Today is Passion Sunday, the start of the two weeks when we are invited to not just accompany Jesus on his last great journey to the Cross – but also to watch ourselves and the way we do it. Instead of getting hung up on trivial inconveniences, we are encouraged to look at what is Passion means - then and now.**

**As I suggested in a sermon a few weeks ago, Thomas and I have been reading St Mark’s Gospel together during Lent – not quite in one sitting but very systemically so we get the raw flavour – as we prepare for his adult baptism. Last Thursday we were giving some thought to the key question in chapter 10 when Jesus takes the Twelve Disciples on the walk to Jerusalem and spells out clearly that he was on his way to die. Why did Jesus have to die? we asked.**

**It had already been an interesting conversation which had touched on Renaissance Art as seen in Edinburgh, the French Resistance and the Chinese connection with the nuclear fleet in Brest (you see how wide-ranging Bible Studies can be!) but we also began to look at the motivation behind those willing to share in Christ’s Passion – those whom the Church calls martyrs.**

**The Greek origin of the word lies in the word for witness: someone who voluntarily suffers death as the penalty for refusing to renounce their religion – or what their religion calls them to do. In the picture language of the book of Revelation they are the ones who now wear the white robes of the pure and the elect because they were willing to shed their blood for the sake of Christ.**

**And the list of martyrs for Christ is extraordinarily long, starting with the stoning of Stephen in the Book of Acts (7: 54-8:1) and failing to end with the murder of some 2,000 Christians in the Cabo Delgado province of Mozambique very recently which their local bishop describes as ‘the experience of the Cross’ as Boko Haram related terrorists tore into whole communities there, burning, torturing and killing as they went.**

**The idea that people would willingly give up their lives for Christ, has always been a powerful one in my thinking. It speaks of total commitment, complete trust in the promises of God that *his kingdom will come and his will be done, on earth as it is in heave*n, even if it required the giving of one’s life. I have long reflected on the heroic stories of 20th century martyrs – those killed during the 2nd World war, among them, Maximilian Kolbe, Etty Hillesum and Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Janani Lewum the Anglican Archbishop of Uganda in 1977 and Oscar Romero the Catholic Archbishop of San Salvador in 1980.**

**Let’s take a quick look at Maximilian Kolbe’s story as a way of understanding what martyrdom really feels like. Kolbe was a monk in Poland but also a journalist. His paper was soon shut down by the Germans and he was finally imprisoned in Auschwitz in 1941. In 1943, along with the rest of the inmates, he was summoned to the parade ground where ten prisoners were to be selected for death by starvation after another prisoner had escaped.**

**When the total stranger standing next to Kolbe, was selected, he cried out in grief, *My wife my child!* In a split-second Kolbe stepped forward and offered to take his place.**

**A total stranger. Death by starvation. What on earth made Maximilian Kolbe stand in for this man?**

**How often I have asked myself: what would I have done? This wasn’t some grand gesture; in the grim early morning half-light the event would have been over in minutes and the condemned men would have been led away to the subterranean bunker, never to be seen again.**

**Or the story of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who broadcast messages of hope to the people of San Salvador for over three years, a country wrecked by abductions and killings on behalf of the right-wing military dictatorship. So powerful were these messages, so courageous his determination, that it was hardly a surprise that armed soldiers shot him dead while saying Mass in a hospital chapel in 1980.**

**Again, would I have been that brave?**

**Reading St Mark, recalling the Passion of Jesus, Thomas and I could not but keep asking the question: why? Why would these people do these things?**

**Was it to in some way to win God’s blessing, to sacrifice their lives in the hope that God would pour his favour on them and on the people who were being saved? That is what sacrifices in the Old Testament were about. Jesus’ parents took pigeons to be offered as sacrifices at the time of Jesus’ birth and the slaughter of vast numbers of animals is the background to the cleansing of the Temple on Palm Sunday. If we give up something, then we will be forgiven/restored/renewed. Making a sacrifice: it will atone for all my sins. The more I give the better it will be…**

**Thankfully the New Testament will have none of that: the Letter to the Hebrews exposes this thinking as shallow and completely false. No, the motivation behind the actions of Maximilian Kolbe, Oscar Romero and countless other martyrs, is not about buying off God’s anger but – like Jesus – it was the fullest and only way to show total, absolute, love. Kolbe, in that split second, loved enough to give up his own life for a man he never knew.**

**And each of the martyrs show us the meaning behind Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel: *unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a seed. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.* What examples these martyrs remain for us, ever since.**

**And to think that of the absolute absurdity of getting irritated with a security glitch on my bank card…**

**At the annual national ecumenical service to mark the 41st anniversary of Oscar Romero’s martyrdom, held in St Martin’s in the Fields last Saturday, Sr Gemma Simmonds said, *You and I may not be called upon to die as martyrs but we are most certainly called upon to live as martyrs: that is, as witnesses to the call of Christ in the poor and marginalised.***

**Yes, that is true: we are called to give ourselves to the needs of those around us who have so much less than we do.**

**But at the micro level, in the day to day events of our lives, aren’t we called – especially in Passion-tide – to something even more basic: to love enough to overlook 99% of the mini irritations and slights that so easily overwhelm us?**

**We all know that other people’s failures or opinions can so easily be the mainstay of our conversations. Can’t we let them go? What a powerful witness it would be if we never talked about them and never allowed them to get under our skin?**

**If Passiontide is going to be real for us this year it may be we have to adopt the phrase from the American Urban Dictionary to ‘zip it’! I know I need to.**

**Better to take encouragement from St Peter in the second reading: Despite all the temptations to complain: *Rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings so that the spirit of his glory may rest in you.***

***Unless a grain of what falls to the ground and dies it remains just a seed. But if it dies it bears much fruit…***