

## Good Friday Homily 2021

Last night, as I read through the Passion we've just heard, my attention was drawn to a little detail Saint John includes in his narrative. He tells us it was cold when Peter denied Jesus – the disciple was warming his hands by a charcoal fire when he claimed not even to know the Lord. Having spent the last few weeks worrying about how the weather would be today, I suppose it's inevitable that this aside would jump out at me; but I wonder, too, if more is meant here. On the night of Peter's denial it was cold. Love has grown cold in his heart: he cannot find the love he needs to stand alongside His Saviour on this day.

Today we gather on a very pleasant April day, our gathering taking place outdoors because of the restrictions. It would not be everyone's first choice, and yet perhaps this new setting enables us to imagine more vividly what it was like to stand at the foot of the cross on the hill of Calvary, or to stand at the place of judgment, Gabbatha – the Pavement – as Jesus was tried and sentenced. In both of these scenes, all eyes seem to be fixed on Jesus: those gathered around the cross look upon Him, lifted up for our salvation. The crowds who demand His crucifixion fix their gaze upon Him in anger in that famous judgement scene, often referred to by Pilate's words: *Ecce Homo* – "Behold, the man".

And so today we behold the man before us. This man, a criminal in the world's eyes, is held up in front of us. "Without beauty, without majesty we saw Him", Isaiah prophesied, "No looks to attract our eyes. A thing despised and rejected by men... So disfigured did He look that He seemed no longer human." And yet the image before us is all too human. A human being, disfigured by human violence and hatred. The Book of Genesis, in describing the creation of the world, speaks of six days on which God created, before He rested on the Jewish Sabbath, the seventh day, Saturday. It was on the sixth day, the Friday, that the Lord created human beings: in His own image He created us. Now, on this Friday, we see Him in *our* image – the disfigured image of humanity fallen from grace. Humanity in desperate need of a Saviour.

Isaiah today describes "a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering; a man to make people screen their faces." There is a part of all of us that recoils from looking on the Lord. Sometimes we choose to look away from His face disfigured by poverty, grief, fear, worry or sin in the people around us – we would rather screen our eyes from the reality of suffering, protecting ourselves from sharing in pain. Sometimes we may shield ourselves from the Lord because of our shame. The first humans hid from the Lord when they realised they had sinned;

we too, perhaps, back away from the Lord when we are conscious of our unworthiness before Him. And so we shield our face from Him. Sometimes we may even shield ourselves from Him because we cannot bear the radiance of His light. Knowing ourselves to be imperfect, we do not want to look upon One who is utter perfection; when we feel unloved, or even unlovable, we may screen our faces from the God of perfect love.

If any of these ring true for us, let's take heart in the example of those who were close to Jesus as He died on the cross. His mother, Mary, did not hesitate to share in His suffering. Mary Magdalen, despite a sinful past, did not hide away from Him in shame. St John did not shield Himself from the loving gaze of Christ: he knew himself to be the Beloved Disciple. None of these screened their faces from the Lord. Today, as the image of the cross is held up before us for adoration, these witnesses to the Cross teach us to look with confidence upon that image: that sign which is the proof of God's love, the gift of His mercy, and our hope of salvation. Behold the man, condemned for you; behold the wood of the Cross, on which hung the salvation of the world; behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Let us not turn our faces from Him, but look with love at Him in return for the love He shows us.

Today's psalm also speaks of a man whom others can't bear to look at. "In the face of all my foes I am a reproach, an object of scorn to my neighbours and of fear to my friends." But then the psalmist prays, "Let Your face shine on Your servant; save me in Your love." This is the Lord's desire. So let's not shield ourselves from Him, but look upon His face today: a face disfigured by fallen humanity, but still radiant with divine love. Let Your face shine on us today, Lord, on this day when You save us in Your love. Let us feel Your warmth in the coldness of our hearts, Your light in the darkness of our lives.

Fr Andrew

