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Sunday 21 March

Theme: Lent 5 **Passion Sunday**

Isolation Radio Talk

No, says Christ, 'with me or against me'; there's no other way

Good Morning

Against the advice of his disciples who sensed a growing tide of hostility and danger waiting for them, Jesus sets out for Jerusalem. Thomas, (the disciple with the unfortunate label of 'Doubting Thomas') is quoted only five times in the Gospels; this is one of them; I leave you to guess his mood; 'Come on, let us go to Jerusalem so that we can die with him'. The Gospel author Mark, goes on to say the disciples were filled with awe; until, that is, they fall out about who amongst them is the most important. They begin the weeklong journey from the shores of the sea of Galilee; their destination is Bethany, two miles from Jerusalem, where Jesus stays each night until his arrest on Maundy Thursday.

There are glimpses in the Gospels of uncertainty in Jesus, his inner world of fear and confusion. He seems to ask, 'Father, is this really what I have to do?'; just as he prayed later at Gethsemane that the cup would pass from him. He certainly had to deal with those outside voices, all very sensible. 'Don't go'.

I must not jump ahead, as I plead with you not to jump from Palm Sunday to Easter Day with nothing in between. It is tempting to enjoy Palm Sunday; the procession – the shouting 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, Hosanna in the highest'. The next thought then is Easter Day; even more joy and thanksgiving - 'Alleluia, Christ is risen'. No! No! The first Holy Week was not like that then, nor should it be now.

Do not feel guilty - there is too much of that. I want you to explore more deeply Christ's Passion, the reason for it, the mystery of it; even in these difficult days the Church has a rich liturgy for Holy Week; space for reflection, time for prayer; telling the story; now so remote in history and culture it is the foundation of your personal faith; pointing to matters of eternal concern.

Christian faith is costly. If it does not cost, it does not count. Believe that truth; Cross is before Resurrection. You cannot avoid that Cross; it is even harder to believe the Resurrection. 'Rachel weeping for her children,' says St Matthew, 'she refused to be consoled, because they are no more' (Matthew 2.18).

Two disciples ask for an easy access to the best seats; Jesus says 'hold on! It is not so easy.' Anyone who wants an easy resurrection must think again. Transformation comes first; the religious word for that is 'conversion'. Jesus says, 'turn to me and away from yourself' - in other words away from your egos. For some it is sudden, for most it is a gradual, growing process. Intellect and emotion go hand-in-hand. A Christian grows in faith best by being immersed in the life of worship and fellowship in the Church of God; you walk with your hand in the hand of God. The Disciples walked with Jesus.

Understand the call of Passion Sunday; to go where our Saviour directs and at whatever cost. If you follow Jesus carefully through Holy Week – you hear Jesus cry from the cross. One person did something; ran and fetched a sponge. The rest said, 'let be, just watch what happens'. They were the majority; they usually are when it comes to decision time: a public figure condemned: it is easier to say, 'let be – wait and see'.

To do nothing is so tempting; to be critical of others is so tempting. Church! Bishop! give me an answer; then you discover that having thought you were given no answer, the answer *you* have given is actually; no!

Jesus, your Saviour, asks for an answer; he asks you now on Passion Sunday as the journey begins; he will ask again in Holy Week. I pray you reply, as Peter did, 'you are Christ, Son of the living God? [you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God? (Matthew 16.16; Mark 8.29)]. However hesitantly you say it, there is work to do; energetic thinking; decisive action.

Some of Christ's stories are about energy; the parable of the talents; the wise maidens who thought ahead and brought extra oil; the man who found treasure; the woman who swept her house until she found the lost coin; the friend at midnight who wouldn't take no for an answer; he hammered the door until he got his loaves of bread.

More dismal bits of the parables tell another story, our Lord warns against drifting and half-heartedness; the person who everlastingly says they will, and then doesn't; who promises to work, and doesn't; who hears the new idea with enthusiasm, but there is no depth so it does not take root; the person who builds on sand. No, says Christ, 'with me or against me' (Matthew 12.30; Luke 11.23); there's no other way.

Be positive: if you are with him you will walk with him; you will be drawn to worship, you will want to pray, you will want to share, you will want to love; you will come to see in all the sadness and the awfulness of his death that it was not a catastrophe, a tragic event; it was not the horrible failure it appears. Many people portray it as failure; they do so by their lives and actions; for others it is the way to eternal life. Do not be fooled, there is not an easy way.

Christ's call - God's call - is both personal and it is universal. It involves that transformation of heart: that revolution of life; that turning again to Him; decisive action in worship and prayer. He asks that of you; he says, 'follow me' (Matthew 4.19).

You are not alone; Jesus journeys with his disciples to Jerusalem. Not all of them loved equally; not all were faithful; at one point all of them 'deserted him and fled' (Mark 14.50; Matthew 26.56). The episode is set in a complex web of relationships. You have your relationship with Jesus Christ; it must be worked on; it is worked out with others; to make sense, that means the Church.

The question remains this Passion Sunday; it is local, it is now. Will you turn to Christ; stay with him through this troubled time? I can say to you; you will not be alone; you will be in company; good company and bad company; with that rather glorious, turbulent, questioning, uncertain, faithful, caring, loving, broken body of Christ. It is called the Church.

Thank you for listening

Prayer

Let us pray.

Help us to accept, O Christ
that our paths may not be smooth
and our journeys may often be risky.

Help us to accept
vulnerability with no promise of security.
Help us to give you
devotion with no promise or reward.

We don't know what we're asking when we ask for these things.
But give us hands to take the cup you hold out to us
- a cup of companionship;
help us gladly immerse ourselves in the baptism you want us to share;
and to so know you on the road with us
that all our anxious thoughts of status, security and reward
wash away,
and we are left with you,
just you,
astonished by your love for us again.
Amen.

*By John Davies; 'Lent & Easter Readings from Iona;
Wild Goose Publication; The Iona Community*