**Mark, chapters 14 and 15.**

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

Palm Sunday has two clear themes: first, Jesus rides into Jerusalem; and the second part, which we heard this morning, was the reading of the Passion narrative – the death of Jesus. Whether or not you have a procession featuring a real live donkey, and whether or not you do a full dramatic passion, today rams home the journey of Holy Week: the people receive Jesus amid great rejoicing, yet five days later they are jeering as he dies a horrible death.

In the deepest sense, the different Gospel accounts of the death of Jesus are the same. Which make the different emphasis of each even more significant as we study them and seek to draw closer to Jesus.

First, though, that word ‘passion’ seems an odd one. For us today it means strong emotion – being passionate about something might mean being very actively engaged in it, whether that be sport or politics or anything in between. But that is not its original meaning and definitely not what it means here. ‘Passion’ in this context really means ‘being done to’. It is the root of words like patient. Being done to, helpless, unable to act. That's why the chapters in each Gospel that talk about the crucifixion are known as "passion narratives": they tell us how Jesus was ‘done to’.

As we go on this journey, we need to clear our minds of what we think we know. A lot of Christian piety and art focuses on the suffering of Jesus, and thinking back a few years to Mel Gibson's film The Passion, I remember being transfixed but also repulsed by the endless depiction of blood and pain and constant whipping.

But none of that is central in the Gospels. Certainly Jesus suffered. But the Gospels writers knew that thousands of people had already died like this, whipped and crucified. This was, by that token, quite ordinary suffering. The Gospels only spend one verse on the crucifixion itself because it is not the suffering of Jesus that is extraordinary, but the person of Jesus as he undergoes that suffering. Because it is not only Jesus, the man, who is being crucified – it is God.

If we look at Mark and Matthew, we find that their accounts of the death of Jesus are very similar - at times almost word for word. And it is very familiar territory for us as western Christians. From the Last Supper onwards the emphasis is on abandonment. Jesus prophesies that the disciples will fail him, and they do - falling asleep in Gethsemane and leaving the scene when Jesus is arrested. I was talking to some parishioners in the last few days, who have just returned from a trip to the Holy Land, and it struck me quite forcefully that there are some very ancient olive trees in the Garden of Gethsemane, and that we can look on those trees in the belief that some of them may actually witnessed the struggles of Jesus in that grove. …

Then after his arrest, Jesus ceases to act almost completely. He is literally ‘being done to’. Jesus is ‘handed over’ - a word used again and again in the Passion Narratives; he is rendered helpless. The all-powerful rendered power-less. All Jesus has to do now is move forward towards the inevitable.

Many priests I know relate to this Gethsemane moment: we run round like the proverbial headless chickens in the second half of Lent, trying to get our heads round services and reflections and sermons and other preparations for Easter, and then we arrive at the beginning of Holy Week realising that, whatever we do or don’t do, the inexorable march on to the Cross is happening. And it is suddenly like being in the eye of a storm: there is a marked stillness settling around us. There is little more we can do other than live through it. It is a strange form of peace.

Those gospels contain quite moving stylistic touches. When Jesus is slapped, both Mark and Matthew explicitly refer back to the suffering servant in Isaiah 50 - but of course the people they were writing for would have known that, in Isaiah, this goes hand in hand with the promise of vindication by God.

Again, in both Matthew and Mark, at the cross, is the bleakness of a terrible death - Jesus cries out: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Which is a quote from the opening of Psalm 22. But there's a twist even there - the evangelists (the gospel writers) again expect us to know that although Psalm 22 begins with abandonment, it ends as a song of praise: it goes from: I am a worm and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people….you lay me in the dust of death, to: To him indeed shall all who sleep in the earth bow down…and I shall live for him.

Luke's story of Jesus is in strong contrast to parts of Mark’s and Matthew’s Passion narratives. The overarching picture drawn by his gospel is of Jesus as a friend in and of our frailty; an example of how to face trials and persecution. So, in Luke at the Last Supper, there is no prediction that the disciples will fail; no sense of abandonment. Indeed throughout the passion narrative in Luke there is a deep sense of Jesus' continuing communion with the Father. In Gethsemane he does not fall prostrate but kneels, ready to face what is coming. And he heals the servant's ear. At the cross, he prays for those who crucify him and tells the penitent thief: today you will be with me in Paradise.

Luke’s is a very different version of Jesus' death. He depicts Jesus' last words from the cross again in a quotation from the Psalms: into your hands I commend my spirit. Not a cry of abandonment, but an expression of trust and obedience, taken from Psalm 31; words that we hear again from Luke on the lips of Stephen, the first martyr, as he is stoned to death in chapter 7 of the Acts of the Apostles.

We are used to John’s gospel being very different from the three synoptic gospels; it adopts a whole different structure, much more poetic and employing many theological motifs; (interestingly, the only miracle all four gospels have in common is the feeding of the 5,000. Highly significant in its way, but maybe not a subject for today... )

John's account of the death of Jesus also offers a huge contrast. For one thing, the date and the time are different: it is the day before the Passover, not - as in the other Gospels - the day of the Passover; and Jesus begins his journey to the cross at noon, just as the Passover lambs are being prepared. John’s message is clear: Jesus is the new Passover lamb who will do away with the need for any further sacrifice.

From the beginning of this account, Jesus is in control. He is active, not passive; what he says leads to outcomes. He has absolutely no doubts or questions, and has no need of help. At his arrest he speaks the divine name ‘I am’ (which is unfortunately translated in most Bibles – even the NRSV - as ‘I am he’), with the quite extraordinary response being that the soldiers fall to the ground. There is an absolute sense of Jesus' continuous communion with the Father. And again, no sense of abandonment or desolation. In the trials, Jesus takes control. He has no need of help - John insists that Jesus carries his own cross; there is no place in John’s version for Simon of Cyrene. And Jesus' final words from the cross – though interpreted by some as a defeatist It is finished - is actually a cry of triumph: ‘it is completed!’ He is remains active even in death, with blood and water flowing from his wounded side.

This is all of course just a quick sketch. But it is supremely important - the New Testament gives us three contrasting yet complementary pictures of the death of Jesus. None of them answer what may well be our most vital questions - why did Jesus die? what does his death mean? What they do is set before us the crucified Messiah and invite us to consider carefully and respond with our own hearts and minds.

And that perhaps is our task as we enter Holy Week - to ponder on these contrasting narratives of the same extraordinary 24 hours. To walk closely with Jesus, holding together in tension all the ambiguities - abandonment by the Father with communion with the Father, despair with trust, tragedy with triumph. But ultimately to kneel in front of the cross and be assured of just how much we are loved by God, that his only Son should lay down his life for his friends.

**Amen**