

THAT HE MAY DWELL IN US  
A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, 2011  
On the Text: Propers for the Day  
By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

As we approach more and more closely to Easter, we find that our focus narrows and becomes more sharp. The object of that focus is the events of Holy Week with an especial emphasis on Easter morning. This I think is a good thing. This narrowing of focus also has the effect of narrowing the range of subjects for sermons. Ministers who have any theological wit about them will not talk about wars, or the burning of the Koran, or election fraud, or any of the many other happenings in this world full of evil. The focus narrows down to the last few weeks in the life of Jesus Christ and what the events of those weeks mean for us.

Today, the fifth Sunday in Lent is called Passion Sunday, which seems to be a strange name for this particular Sunday. It is called this on page 158 of our BCP, and right above that is one word, PASSIONTIDE. It turns out that the last two weeks before Easter have been called Passiontide and were observed by the early church long before the full six weeks and four days before Easter came to be called Lent.

Before going further into the events and meaning of *Passiontide* as a season to be observed, there is something we need to be reminded of -- a question that has to be answered: What does *Passion* have to do with this time before Easter? *Passion* as it is used here doesn't have anything to do with intense emotion or lust. Two thousand years ago, the Latin word, *passio*, meant **suffering**, just as did the related Greek word, *páthos*. If you know that *passion* means *suffering* and you have seen the movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, you will understand why Mel Gibson gave the movie that title. Today is Passion Sunday because on it we begin to focus on the suffering of Jesus and what it means for us and for the world.

So today, the fifth Sunday in Lent, is the beginning of Passiontide. Why did the early church give this name to these two weeks? It seems that the church felt that this was the minimum amount of time that we as Christians should spend in prayer and meditation on the suffering Jesus went through in order to procure our salvation. What's more, even after the longer season of Lent came into full flower, Passiontide remained as a part of Lent as a time to change our emphasis from the self-centered penitence of early Lent to worshipful awe and thanksgiving at what Jesus went through for us.

This history of Passiontide shows up in the Propers for today. The original version of the Collect for today was in Latin in the Gregorian Sacramentary that dates back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. However, it does not speak directly to the themes of Passiontide and Passion Sunday. The Psalm and the Lessons also go back many hundreds of years. An interesting thing in all these is that, except for the Epistle lesson, none of the Propers seems to be concerned with the suffering of Jesus, even tangentially, at least in regard to physical suffering.

A quick overview of the Propers shows us that the OT lesson is about one of the two major themes of the OT: that God is making the Hebrews to be a people for Himself, where in verse 33,

He says, Jeremiah 31:33 <sup>33</sup>**But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.** And He shall do this as He says, by means of a Covenant. However, in this particular passage, there is no mention of the Messiah, although it is obvious that God has not been happy at the behavior of the children of Israel.

Psalms 66 is a song of praise and thanksgiving; there is no hint in it of unhappiness or discomfort on the part of God. It is not until we get to the two lessons from the NT that we can begin to see how those two lessons point to the Passion, the suffering, of Christ.

These last two lessons are not so much about the Passion of Christ as they are about Who He is; they give us a lesson in what is called Christology, the study of Christ. That study attempts to answer such questions as: Who and what is the Christ? and What are His attributes? Many of the answers can be found in the first three Gospels, but St. John is the most forthright and up-front about who Jesus Christ really is. The study of Christology really begins in the first chapter of St. John's Gospel, which is the primary Gospel lesson for Christmas Day. That Gospel lesson is St. John 1:1-14, where in verse 1, St. John comes right out and says that: **ESV John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.** After telling us much about the Word in the next 12 verses, he tells us in verse 14, **John 1:14 14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,**. It takes a few more verses in other places before we can conclude that when the Word became flesh, His Name was Jesus. But then we get a piece of confirming evidence for that near the end of today's Gospel Lesson.

The study of Christology sheds a lot of light on our beliefs and why the Creeds say what they do. One of the ways that is used to help explain why Jesus did some of the things He did is to explain what are called the offices of Christ. Most often He is looked at as having three primary offices while He was on Earth, which were: Prophet, Priest, and King. A *prophet* is simply a person who puts forth the Word of God that has been directly revealed to him. Prophecy does not have to be a foretelling of something that will happen in the future, although it often is. Jesus is revealed as a prophet not only in His predictions of how He will be flogged, crucified, die and be raised, in Mark 10:34; but also by His preaching the Father's message of the New Covenant as in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. Because Christ is God Incarnate, every time He spoke, He was exercising his office as a Prophet.

Likewise, as God Incarnate, Christ is also the King, over all that He created. It is He who calls out a people to be His people as He said in Isaiah 55:5 and Jeremiah 31:33 of our OT lesson. He is King because God the Father gave Him that office, as He said to the disciples at the end of St. Matthew's Gospel in Matthew 28:18 **18 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.** In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus has been arguing with a group of Jews about the privileges they think they should have because they are descendants of Abraham. They accuse Him of being a sinner, of having a devil before He openly declares that God is His Father, and that He knows Abraham. When they say He cannot have known Abraham, He makes the statement that is essentially a claim that He is God: **John 8:58 "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am."** All of the Jews would have under-

stood the claim He was making because of what God said to Moses from the Burning Bush in Exodus 3:14: **14 And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.**

This story is related to a story that is found in the other three Gospels, but which is not the same story, in which Jesus says to some Sadducees who did not believe in the resurrection: Matthew 22:31-32 **31 And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: 32 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living."** That sentence, "He is not God of the dead, but of the living," is a statement Jesus makes after quoting Exodus 3:6. This story is found in Matthew 22, Mark 12, and Luke 20, but is not in the Gospel of John. Even so, both stories show that Christ is the King. It is as Lord and King that He gives us the commands of how we must live and what we are to do to advance His kingdom.

The story in our Gospel lesson is sometimes called, "The Rejection of the King". Christ has successfully argued that He is not guilty of sin, but when they decided to try to stone Him, they could not see Him. It was a blind rejection of God and His Son, and God is not pleased at being rejected by those whom He chose to be His people; for as God says in Ezekiel 33:11 **11 Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?**

Today's Gospel story is in the latter part of chapter 8 of St. John's 21-chapter Gospel, but it is chronologically later than you might think because John gives so much of his Gospel to recording the things Jesus said and did in the last few weeks of His life. Most estimates place this story as happening about 6 months before the Crucifixion, but no more than 8 months before it because of the times of the Jewish holy days that are mentioned. For instance, the beginning of the story of the raising of Lazarus is at the beginning of chapter 11, and that story occurs only a few weeks before Jesus' last Passover.

Let's now look at Jesus Christ in His office as a Priest. The Epistle lesson speaks to this, but there is a little problem of definition. What is a priest? The problem is that there are competing definitions. Our modern idea in the Protestant Church is something on the order of: a person on the middle tier of the three levels of Deacon, Priest, and Bishop, who holds worship services. But in the world of the Jews, a priest was a member of the tribe of Levi who had the duty of making blood sacrifices, of killing the animals, collecting their blood and disposing of it in a prescribed manner, such as sprinkling it on the altar, or on the Day of Atonement, sprinkling it on the Mercy Seat that is above the Ark of the Covenant in the Most Holy Place. The Roman Church thinks of their priests as *sacerdotal* priests, as those who perform sacrifices. We do not, which is why we prefer to call our second tier of clergy, Presbyters, which is derived from the old Greek word, **πρεσβύτερος**, for elder. In English, *Priest* is just a contraction of Presbyter. The thing is that in our Epistle lesson, Christ *is* a sacerdotal priest, who sacrificed Himself in a sacrifice that atoned for the sins of the whole world. Christ is our Passover who is sacrificed for us. So, today in the Epistle lesson, we take a look toward His physical suffering, His Passion.

Why did He do this, subject Himself to the horror of Crucifixion? St. Paul tells us in his Epistle to the Romans how the Law of Moses made it impossible for people to be sinless in the way God wanted them to be, so something had to be done in order that He might have a people. As St. Paul puts it in Romans 8:29, “in order that he [Jesus] might be the firstborn among many brothers.” Here, the Greek word translated as brothers should have been translated in this instance as “brothers and sisters”. This sacrifice was also done so that Jesus might not lose anyone whom the Father had given him, as He is quoted as saying in John 6:38-39 **38 For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. 39 And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.**

We cannot imagine the suffering of Jesus on the day he was crucified: the flogging, the crown of thorns, the humiliation, the trek to hill, and then the Crucifixion. We find it hard to imagine all the suffering that St. Paul went through, with his floggings, stonings and shipwrecks; but in Romans 8: 16-18, he dismisses all that as being barely worth considering: Romans 8:16-18 **16 The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: 17 And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together. 18 For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.**

Each year at Passion Sunday, I turn to another part of St. John’s Gospel that is not a Gospel lesson for any Sunday because that passage describes just how close a family God wants to have, words that we use in every service of Holy Communion. That passage is John 17, Jesus’ great High Priestly Prayer to the Father, in which I am especially drawn to what Jesus says He wants for all believers, especially for those who have come to faith through hearing and reading the words of His disciples. In John 17:20-23, Jesus asks this: **20 Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; 21 That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. 22 And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: 23 I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me.**

Jesus suffered and died for us. He took upon Himself the sins of the whole world and felt the Father’s wrath for it. We were baptized into His death, but not into that degree of suffering. Only He could do what had to be done, and He did it that we might be His brothers and sisters and that we might share His glory. Our sufferings in this life are infinitesimal in comparison. He suffered and died for us, that He might dwell in us, **and (as Jesus said) that the world may know that Thou hast sent Me, and hast loved them, as Thou hast loved Me.**

Greater Love hath no man,...

AMEN.