

Sermon for Holy Trinity on Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> April 2025 am  
5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent and Start of Passiontide.

*Texts: Isaiah 43.16-21; Philipians 3.5-14; John 12.1-8*

## **Lost and Found**

Many years ago, I taught in a school in India in the foothills of the Himalayas. The school used to have long half term in the winter and summer semesters and during this time, the staff and members of the sixth form who wished could take part in major trips and events across India.

I joined a group which was hiking in the Himalayas. It was exciting and challenging and each evening we would return to the village where we were staying. However, one day, in the late afternoon, we lost our way and could not find the path down. There was a rapidly flowing river on one side and sheer drops on the other. It was mid-November, and the light was fading rapidly. We searched in vain for a pathway down and then realised, with considerable concern, that it was too dangerous to try to get down that night. We would have to spend the night where we were and try again in the morning.

It was a very long and extremely uncomfortable night which I will not forget in a hurry. We found an enclave in a rock and huddled there, lit a fire both for warmth and as a possible protection against bears which we knew were in that area and tried as best we could to support and encourage each other through the long, cold and scary hours of the night. As first dawn, as we arose, cold and stiff, we heard cries of a rescue group who had come up from the village and led us down to safety. I can still remember now, the sheer relief of being rescued and how good the breakfast which we then shared together tasted.

I imagine that many of us here today will have shared the experience of being physically lost at some point or other in our lives and how frightening it can be. But it's also possible to get spiritually and morally lost which many ways is worse because it leaves hating ourselves yet feeling trapped and helpless.

This can happen at all sorts of different levels. It can affect us as individuals through the decisions we take or fail to make which can result us ending up in a place and situation in which we don't want to be but can't, for the life of us, find a way out.

It can also happen to us a society where partly due to a combination of our own decisions and behaviour and partly due our compliance with wrongs done by those who lead us, we go astray. This can happen on a global scale too, particularly with growing globalisation and mass communications today. It's a reality which has been sharply brought home to us in the events of the past week.

Going astray, taking the wrong path morally and spiritually which leads us away from God into hells of our own making, isn't though a new phenomenon. We find it right at the heart of the Bible. The prophet Jeremiah describes it graphically in the light of

his own context as he experienced the moral decay of Israel and its blindness and denial of the growing threat of invasion by the Babylonians. He writes:

*'But my people have forgotten me,  
they burn offerings to a delusion;  
they have stumbled in their ways,  
in the ancient roads,  
and have gone into bypaths,  
not the highway,  
making their land a horror,  
a thing to be hissed at for ever' (Jeremiah 18.15-16).*

But the situation isn't hopeless. Today, at the start of Passiontide, we are going to see where that hope lies. Passiontide is the last two weeks of Lent in which we are invited to follow closely with Jesus in the path which will lead him to Jerusalem and to the Cross. But as we enter into that journey with him, we also begin to glimpse the path which will lead to our salvation.

It's a path which has its roots right back in the Old Testament, in the Exodus, when God led his people from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the promised land which he has prepared for them. The prophet Isaiah helps us to see in this act, both the foundation of our salvation and also the nature of God. He is the one who longs for us to be free, who can create a path to that freedom even through those elements which threaten to kill us such as the mighty waters of the sea and the burning heat of the desert. He is the God who will give us life-giving water even in the dried-up wilderness and will bring life and hope even in situations of apparent hopelessness.

Passiontide is a time when we are called to consider with strict honesty before God, where our lives and the nature of the society we live, have fallen short – where we have stumbled off the highway of God which leads to life and have become trapped in byways which are harmful and in some cases, destructive.

St Paul certainly knew about the power of rigorous self-examination but also shows us how life-giving it can be. In his Letter to the Philippians, he describes with absolute candour, how in his former life, he had both enjoyed the privilege of an excellent education and had convinced himself that his strict observance of the Law and ruthless persecution of Christians, he was carrying out God's will. Yet, in his dramatic encounter with the risen Christ as he journeyed to Damascus, he realised with immense clarity, how he had been on the wrong path. For instead of serving God, he had in fact been persecuting the Son of God. Yet St Paul also realised that in this revelation, he had discovered the One who leads us from death to life, who guides us on the true path to God the Father. This is why he exclaims that all that he taken pride in before he now sees as worthless because he has found in Christ, the One who loves us and calls us to be His own.

And Mary, who with her sister Martha and brother of Lazarus, were probably Jesus' closest friends, shows us how Jesus would be the one who will enable all of us, no matter how far or badly we have strayed, to find in Him the path back to God. She does so by act of anointing his feet with the rare and precious ointment and drying them with her hair whilst he is staying at their home in Bethany.

We can perhaps have some sympathy with Judas at this horror of this act. After all, was it not indeed a great waste – a completely needless extravagance? Surely it is always better to give to the poor than squander a precious resource in this way!

Yet Mary is performing prophetic act. She may not have realised the full horror of what would happen to Jesus, but she glimpsed that he would die soon. In anointing him, she was in some way, proclaiming to Jesus, the path that God was calling him to take which was to die for us. It was also a witness to the reality of God's kingdom, rooted on love, justice and compassion, for which each one of us is called to strive.

And Jesus, as he defends Mary against Judas' fierce criticism, affirms that this indeed the path he will take. By dying on the Cross for us, he will create a path of salvation which will be open to everyone willing to take it, to find their way back to God in the path that leads to life.

In Passiontide we remember how Jesus begun his ministry on earth after his baptism, by a period of testing in the desert. Away from the clamour of the world, and in the bare, relentless reality of the wilderness, he saw through the anguish of the temptations he experienced, the falseness of the Devil's claims which appeared to offer him everything but in fact would lead to his spiritual death. He also glimpsed, the truth which would become clearer to him each day of his ministry, that God, his Father was calling him to create a path of life for us, by offering his life for our sakes.

So over the next two weeks, let us have the courage to follow Christ in the events of his Passion, and in the light of these, to look honestly about the reality of our own lives at present. May we have the courage to acknowledge where we have indeed strayed from the path that leads to God and the values of His kingdom and have instead, followed byways which have led us to act wrongly and to live in self-denial.

May we, this Passiontide, draw strength and hope from Christ who has offered us in his life, Passion and resurrection, a true path back to God. And may we also be inspired by those Christians who have made Christ's Passion, the path for their own lives. On 9<sup>th</sup> April next week, we will commemorate Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German priest and theologian who was killed by the Nazis in prison on that day, in 1945. He was executed by them because of his courageous and consistent opposition to their regime, inspired by his faith in Christ, just one month before it was liberated by the Allied Forces.

I will end today with prayer written by Bonhoeffer, aware of his fear, anxiety and loneliness yet also recognising God's presence, in the midst of the horror, creating a way for him. May it inspire us and bring us hope and courage this Passiontide:

*'O God, early in the morning I cry to you. Help me to pray and to concentrate my thoughts on you; I cannot do this alone.*

*In me there is darkness, but with you there is light; I am lonely, but you do not leave me; I am feeble in heart, but with you there is help; I am restless, but with you there is peace.*

*In me there is bitterness, but with you there is patience; I do not understand your ways, but you know the way for me'.*

**Amen**

**The Revd Canon Dr Daphne Green**