

## Passion Sunday

John 12.20-33

If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all. Hamlet 5.2

*Hamlet* was the principal text for my final English exam at school; like the Bible, it is, as someone once said, full of quotations. From 'to be or not to be' to 'Now cracks a noble heart. Good-night sweet prince' we hear lines from Hamlet in likely and unlikely places. Authors pick out phrases to use as titles, from Agatha Christie's 'Murder most foul' and 'The Mouse-trap', to Alan Bennet's 'Single spies'. Remembering its opening line, 'Who's there?' once gained me huge kudos in a quiz night. I remember my father being asked by a parishioner if he could identify a text that she wanted to use for a confirmation card - 'above all else, to thine own self be true' - and her embarrassment on learning that this was an intentionally trite piece of Shakespearean self-help from Polonius to Laertes.

In Act 5 Scene 2, from which I quoted, Hamlet speaks to the urgency of the moment, 'the readiness is all'; this is a focus which recurs in Jesus teaching, especially in John's telling, but also elsewhere in the New Testament. Jesus' repeated references to his 'hour' in John's Gospel ties in with a New Testament emphasis on the critical moment or *Kairos* in the working out of salvation and in the urgency of our own response to Jesus.

*Kairos* (καῖρός) is an Greek word meaning the right, critical, or opportune moment. The ancient Greeks had two words for time: *chronos* (χρόνος) and *kairos*. *Chronos* refers to chronological or sequential time, while *kairos* signifies a proper or opportune time for action. *Chronos* is quantitative, *kairos* has a qualitative significance. Wonderfully, in modern Greek, *kairos* also means 'weather' – for which we all have to be ready.

Jerusalem, Luke tells us, did not recognise the unique *kairos* when Jesus came to save it. The reproach which Jesus must bring against 'the crowds' (Lk 12.54) is that they did not think it worth the trouble to try to discern the decisive character of the *kairos* of religious decision implied by his messianic character [Lk 12.56; cf. Mk 16.3]. In Mark 1 the fact that this *kairos* is now present as God's gift of the fulfilment of OT prophecy is the first startling declaration of the Gospel, used by the Church as a key text for the beginning of Lent:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time [*kairos*] is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'  
Mark 1.14-15

Our use of this on Ash Wednesday and Lent 1 reflects Paul's frequently expressed proclamation of the urgency of our recognition and acceptance of Christ and our acting upon it to change how we live:

Behold, now is the acceptable time [*kairos*]; behold, now is the day of salvation!

2 Corinthians 6.2

'The readiness is all': Passion Sunday veils the cross from our eyes in order to disclose it afresh on Good Friday, to focus our devotion again what Jesus meant by his hour, his 'now':

The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified...unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit.

'The readiness is all'. Again and again Jesus tells his friends what is really happening.

Like Hamlet he does this sometimes in riddles and parables, sometimes by performing prophetic actions (as Hamlet might comment, 'the play's the thing, wherein to catch the conscience of the king'). Again and again they don't get it and the world mostly doesn't get it either, even now.

The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified...unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit.

Most of us have faced the death of those we love. A few of them will have tried to prepare us for their death; some will not have accepted what was happening to them; some will have died without warning; this year some have had to die without their loved ones at hand.

Passion Sunday is a reminder consciously to turn our faces towards *our own* end; to know that our mortality makes sense of our life. Once we get that perspective, which Jesus tried repeatedly to convey, we are more likely to act in the light of eternity instead of by the dimmer flame of what might happen tomorrow, next month, next year, or what the neighbours might think.

The cross, which we veil today in order to see it afresh on Good Friday, is a parable of strength which is literally hidden. Paul got it: God is here revealed in weakness; what is foolish in this world shames the wise. The veiling and unveiling are a reminder to us to *look* more carefully; a reminder that even when we do see there the image of the torture-victim judicially murdered, we don't see what is really going on; a reminder that the processes of the Kingdom, as the parables so often illustrate, are often hidden behind small and simple things: bread, wine, water, oil, and.... death.

The point of this season, of Lent, and the more sharply focused fortnight before

Easter that we call Passiontide, is to recall us to self-examination and our right context as Christian people. How does any particular course of action stand up in the light of eternity, of the love which dared to die that we might live?

Once we get that, we better understand the present moment and the long perspective.

If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all.

We aren't faced with judicial execution like Jesus. We don't all face a crisis which issues in life or death, but mortality is the truest, most egalitarian context and perspective for all our lives. The accumulation of our *small* choices is all about *choosing* life, or *not*; that is the core of our faith. And

the readiness is all.