

**PASSION SUNDAY MESSAGE FOR SHEPPARTON UNITING CHURCH AND SHEPPARTON
RURAL CONGREGATIONS 5TH APRIL 2020**

The peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all

The Readings: Isaiah 50: 4-9, Psalm 31: 9-16, Ephesians 2: 5-11, Mathew 26: 14 – 27: 66.

(Prayer)

Lord, speak your word in the words of your servant, so that your word may live in us and bear much fruit to your glory.

MESSAGE: 'An experience of beauty and brutality'.

The combination of beauty and brutality is something we are all too familiar with in our daily lives. The unprecedented attack of the corona virus on humanity has heightened even magnified that experience. From the ugliness of self-centredness and greed in our stores and supermarkets streamed across our television and in the social media, to an increase in domestic violence and burglary.

The million who have at the time of writing this sermon being infected by this terrible disease to those who have no way of hugging or kissing their loved ones who have passed, due to social distancing laws.

Along these brutal pictures are also stories of great inspiration. Stories of doctors and nurses at the frontline of battling the disease, taking a great risk that they themselves can end up as victims too, and those who serve our elderly and most vulnerable in aged care homes. The overworked volunteers and the generosity of loving and caring people in offering practical help for victims during this difficult time, to the prayers offered and tears shed privately out of compassion.

It is a most challenging time for the church – struggling to care for and sustain the hope and trust in God and proclaim the good news to the bereaved, the lost and the confused. One thing I am sure of is that we are allowed to ask, and we do ask "Lord, what are you doing? What is going on?" There is something telling in this kind of honest dialogue with God because it reveals that there is a relationship intact.

Although the gathered are now scattered and distanced, we remain united by the Spirit that calls us into community and, although we are distanced socially and geographically, we are still one in our resolve and determination in God's mission. Our unity in that Spirit cannot be broken for our hope and our trust is in the God who will not leave us orphaned.

We read of the same juxtaposition of beauty and brutality in our lectionary readings for today. In Isaiah 50, the people in exile, who have been distanced from their home and the land that was promised to their ancestors and granted to their parents and grandparents can anticipate a time that God will bring them home. Yet...it is a stark contrast to the plight of the servant in Isaiah 50 whose persecution is both sad and surprising.

Scott Hoezee noted in 'Sermon Starter' on this text, "Whether it's the assassin's bullet that shatters the face of Martin Luther King Jr, pierces the body of Mahatma Gandhi or takes out Abraham Lincoln; whether it's the Tiananmen Square tanks that threaten to run over non-violent students or the powers that be that sequester away in prison for years a Nelson Mandela, those with a gift to speak sustaining words for the weary and listen to the cries of those who need to be heard are indeed turned over to the smiters and the biters and the spitters and the whole shameful lot of those who carry out this world's worst persecutions".

As Doug Bratt noted in 'The Centre for Excellence in Preaching' quoting Scott Hoezee, "The prophet seems to be, after all, the kind of person most of us would want for a friend. He seems to know just when to talk and when to listen".

The servant recognizes God's gift of mission and the strength to carry it through. A tongue of a teacher and an ear of a person that is willing to be taught. It reminds us that those who wish to speak of the things of God, those who dare to speak on God's behalf, like the servant in Isaiah 50 are awakened in the morning to listen to God like a student.

These days we are more eager to speak than to listen. We should be praying for open ears first before we pray for creative tongues. We must listen to God's promises and instructions first before we run off to speak if we are to speak the things of God at all.

Psalms 31 gives us the opportunity to engage the passion of the Christ in a special way. There are scholars like Stan Mast who believes that verse 13 is the centre of the Psalm 31, "For I hear the slander of many; there is terror on every side; they conspire against me and plot to take my life." As the hosannas rise from the lips of the crowd out in the streets of Jerusalem, whispers of conspiracy filled the back-alley room where the religious leaders huddled to plot Jesus' death. The beauty of children's hosannas and the brutality that is planned in back-alleys. The combination of trust and rejection was to be Christ's, is summed up in verse 5 "I place myself in your care, you will save me Lord; you are a faithful God".

Other scholars argue that Jesus quoted not only verse 5 on the cross but the whole Psalm. Whether that is true or not it is helpful if we engage Psalm 31 as a source of comfort during the difficult times in our lives.

The Psalmist reminds us that if you take refuge in God it makes life more open, more liberating, more fulfilling for "You have not handed me over to my enemies but have set my feet in a spacious place".

There are many who have come through the experience of both the beauty and the brutality of life. The servant in Isaiah, the author of Psalm 31 and no doubt many more now during this difficult time.

I want to conclude with the testimony of such person though it was a long time ago.

William Cowper was born on November 26, 1731, in England. His father was a minister, and his mother died when he was only 6 years old. He was plagued with deep depression, doubt

and insanity for most of his life. At the age of 31 he tried three times to take his own life. Cowper came to faith after he was admitted to the St. Albans Insane Asylum for recovery.

He is the author of that wonderful hymn 'Sometimes a light surprises'. The hymn portrays the beauty he found in faith that restores his soul and his trust in God over against the brutality of his illness. I hope you will find some comfort in it too as I have.

*Sometimes a light surprises
The Christian while he sings;
It is the Lord who rises
With healing in his wings;
When comforts are declining,
He grants the soul again
A season of clear shining
To cheer it after rain.*

*In holy contemplation
We sweetly then pursue
The theme of God's salvation,
And find it ever new;
Set free from present sorrow;
We cheerfully can say,
E'en let the unknown tomorrow
Bring with it what it may.*

*It can bring with it nothing,
But He will bear us through;
Who gives the lilies clothing,
Will clothe His people too;
Beneath the spreading heavens
No creature but is fed;
And He who feeds the ravens
Will give His children bread.*

*Though vine nor fig tree neither
Their wonted fruit should bear,
Though all the field should wither,
Nor flocks nor herds be there;
Yet God the same abiding,
His praise shall tune my voice;
For, while in Him confiding,
I cannot but rejoice.*

Concluding Prayer:

O God who moves in a mysterious way, hear us as we intercede for your people and your creation.

Give courage to those who bring good news of healing and comfort, strengthen those who are weary and burdened with fear and anxiety.

Sustain our trust and our hope in you and be the refuge for those who are lost.

Even as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, lead us and keep us under your everlasting arm.

For while in you confiding, we cannot but rejoice!

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ your Son our Saviour.

Amen.

Blessing:

May God be with you wherever you are. May the God of hope and peace stay with you wherever you are. May the love of God be yours today and always.

Amen.

*Notice: There are people who continue to make their offering through direct debit, cash envelopes to be collected or cheques in the mail. Please contact the treasurer or the secretary of the church council for advice.