

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Dear Parishioners,

Today all our statues and crucifixes are shrouded in purple. Today a season within a season opens: Passiontide. No longer an “official” specific liturgical sub-season, it is best likened to the second part of Advent when, as of 17 December, we shift gear and those who recite Vespers have their hearts lifted in eager expectation by the Major Antiphons, the Great O’s. We have prefaces which are peculiar to the latter part of Lent, we obviously have the haunting spectre of our statues wrapped in purple drapery, but the Church also trains the spotlight of its attention on the relationship between Jesus and the God he calls Father. Like layers coming off an onion, each day the gospel of John introduces some new element, some fresh dimension into Jesus’ understanding of what it is that ties him to his Father, and what exactly it is the Father’s intention that he do.

The disciples were curious to learn more about the dynamic of the relationship between Jesus and his Father, partly because they realised (and feared too) that it had consequences for their relationship with the Master. By co-incidence, over the past few months I have read a number of memoirs written by male writers about precisely the subject which so pre-occupied Jesus and his disciples: the relationship between son and father. I read the fascinating account which Matthew Spender, son of one of England’s greatest and most enigmatic 20th century poets, gave of his father Stephen; a journalist called Sam Miller about his father Karl, literary editor of *New Statesman*, and how he discovered that Karl had not fathered him; and currently I am accompanying the Irish novelist Colm Tóibín on a walking tour of Dublin as he explores the relationship between Oscar Wilde, W.B. Yeats and James Joyce, and their respective fathers. Fascinating stuff, especially during these short ten days between now and the Triduum when the daily gospel focuses on the same subject, i.e. Jesus and his Father, and the former’s growing understanding of what that means, and the way he explains it to his closest friends, the Twelve.

The more I find myself as parish priest preaching a homily after the Gospel has been proclaimed, especially as I am speaking to more or less the same people every week, the more I am convinced that insights into high theology are the fruit of reflection on the nexus of human relationships in which we are all caught up: father/son, daughter/mother-in-law, sister/older brother, siblings, employee/employer, and perhaps – given that our lives these days seem to be so conditioned by politics – citizen/MP. The Passion story is a human drama like no other and the Church deliberately involves us in it more than at any other time in the liturgical year: the congregation joins in the Passion narratives of Palm Sunday and Good Friday with a voice of its own (like a Greek chorus or the chorus from a Bach *Passion*), a member of our congregation is the narrator (i.e. tells the story), another takes the unenviable role of Judas, Peter and Pilate. Most of us will recognise that we have been in many of those Passion roles before.

Fr. Patrick