

**Passion Sunday****My soul is troubled**

*Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-33*

Blackpool has the highest rate of deaths linked to alcohol, drug abuse and suicide in England, a recent study found. BBC News met a team of former addicts trying to turn around the lives of people in the town.

"Hugging my mum again. I'd love that. That would be special."

Tears are streaming down Paul Earnshaw's face as he talked to BBC News journalists. He has struggled for years with alcohol, but is now trying to break free from his addiction. It is going to be a tough journey.

Blackpool is a town plagued by too many preventable fatalities linked to alcohol, drug abuse and suicide - collectively described by the bleakly poetic phrase "deaths of despair" by health researchers. A study of deaths recorded at coroners' courts across England suggests that between 2019 and 2021, about 46,200 people lost their lives in this way - the equivalent of 42 people every day.

"My soul is troubled", said Jesus.

A ministerial colleague came to visit me recently and we talked, amongst other things, about how we'd coped during lockdown. It seemed like a hundred years ago, but images of the empty streets, of restricted times when we were let out of our houses, about the general compliance with social distancing, unless you were working in Downing Street of course, of the ban on flying and train travel, and all the other things we did to keep safe. Alongside the more difficult issues of not being able to visit loved ones in hospitals or nursing homes, and not being able to attend funeral

services, or any church services. My colleague talked about the darkness that descended and sitting on one occasion in their study, head in hands, weeping, and wondering how they'd continue in their ministry if that bleak time lasted much longer.

"My soul is troubled", said Jesus.

In the Christian year this Sunday is sometimes referred to as Passion Sunday; the Sunday when Jesus spelled out, yet again, His understanding of the road He was on, that somehow would lead to His death because of what He stood for, and what He believed in, and why that mattered. Whilst it is uncomfortable, maybe even unpalatable, to think about the suffering Jesus went through, not only on the cross but also on the road to the cross, nonetheless to ignore it in my view diminished our experience of faith. A faith that has nothing to say about suffering, a faith that has a Saviour Who skips blithely down the yellow-brick road from Bethlehem to Nazareth to the shores of Galilee to Jerusalem, emerging generally unscathed by Holy Week and its horror is a sham faith. I'll make my annual plea to you to attend as many of the Holy Week services as you can, and not skip cheerily from Palm Sunday processions to Easter Sunday celebration.

Faith needn't always be miserable and grim, nor should it be always jolly and light-hearted. Somewhere between the two is the path we need to take. There are times to rejoice and be glad, like we did last Sunday; and there are times to lament and be sad. Today we have to take into account the Jesus Who says, "My soul is troubled."

He has good cause, as do we. His troubled soul chimed in with His time, knowing that people were out to do Him harm. Knowing that He was being consistently misunderstood by those closest to Him. Knowing how terrible the world was and what kind of sacrifice it was going to take to begin the process of turning the world around. Knowing that this would not happen overnight and there would still be setbacks and disasters.

"My soul is troubled."

The shattered Gaza strip. The bogged down attrition of the Ukrainian war. The depressing prospects of elections in Russia, in the United States, and in our own country. The brokenness and inadequacies in some, not all, but some of the people in our political system and media. The painfulness and confusion around the Church of Scotland's planning for the future where it sometimes appears that institutional paralysis has given way to institutional panic. And that desperate game plays out in our health service, in education, in the care service, in politics.

"My soul is troubled."

The diagnoses of health conditions that will be life-changing, or ending. The fragility of our economy and the spiralling increase of the cost of living. The loveless relationships. The empty isolation. The struggle of charities to find funding.

"My soul is troubled."

When Jesus says these four words we look into the mind and heart of the Saviour, and we see reflected in it some of our own situation, and the situation of our world today. Dark, downward, devastation, desolation.

"My soul is troubled." "Take this cup away from Me." "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" The hour has come.

And yet. And yet. And yet. Is this where it is going to finish for our country? Is this where it is going to finish for our world? Is this where it is going to finish for us? Is this where it is going to finish for Jesus.

Out of the trouble of His soul; out of this dark Gethsemane moment; out of this precursor of the dereliction on the cross. "Father, save Me from this hour..."

"No", says Jesus. "For this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify Thy Name."

Before we get to the Divine 'Yes' of resurrection and Easter and healing and hope and light, we must encounter the Divine 'No' to the dark, downward, devastation, desolation.

"No", says Jesus. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit...If any one serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there shall My servant be also; if any one serves Me, the Father will honour him, (and her)." "The light is with you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest the darkness overtake you' he who walks in the darkness does not know where he goes. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons (and daughters) of light."

From out of Christ's troubled mind which recognises the reality of darkness and suffering and pain comes the light of hope which touches the world cross-shaped. Jesus is essentially taking the image of the cross and applying it meaning through the parables and stories He taught to shape what our Christian life might be. 'Take up your cross, accept and use your suffering and pain; become a servant; wash the feet of others; give yourself for the benefit of others; don't walk by on the other side; give away your shirt and coat; go the extra mile; turn the other cheek; love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; love God with heart, mind, soul and strength; love others as you love yourself.' Out of your troubled mind, take up your cross, and see where light and hope and life might still come.

Out of your troubled mind, connect Jesus' teaching to the Beatitudes, and find where blessing might still come. 'Blessed are you when you recognise the agony of another. Blessed are you when you respond to pain with relief. Blessed are you when you are reviled for the sake of another. Blessed are you when you lift a burden from another's shoulders. Blessed are you when you enable another to regain their footing. Blessed are you when you assist another to arise. Blessed are you when you take up another's cross.'

"Now my soul is troubled", and we see into the heart of our Saviour, and we see mirrored back something of our own reality, our own life. But does it all stop there? Are we utterly helpless and diminished and wiped out?

"No", says our Saviour. "For this purpose I have come to this hour." It might not be much, but there may be something we can do. The obstacles ahead may be huge, but help may very well come when we work together. The darkness might feel overwhelming, but the best way forward, for the Christian, is to start at the end – with the knowledge of God's victory in Christ – and to work back from there.

In every trouble, God is right there with us. The seed of light, the seed of life. And has earned the right to ask us to hold on a little longer until morning comes. Until resurrection.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**