

## **'The pain and the promise', a talk by ordinand Claire Welch**

For St Peter's Church, Henleaze – Sunday 21 March based on John 12:20-33

I wonder if there have been times in your life where the promise of what's ahead has helped you to persevere through the pain and struggle of the now.

I remember as a child being promised sweets after a dentist appointment to help get me through it. When I was older and went on hikes, I was told that the view was worth the climb. And at times when I have worked hard, it has been the promise of a promotion that has seen me through. Thankfully on each of these occasions the promise came true – I got my sweets, a glorious view, a promotion. These pleasures did not take away the pain, worry and struggle, but knowing there was a destination beyond the pain helped to get me through. I wonder if you have similar stories?

In the reading from John, we are introduced to the internal thoughts and wrestling of Jesus. Having arrived in Jerusalem to a triumphal entry, he knew that his 'hour had come' (v23).

I wonder what it would have been like for him, having an insight into the type of death he would face. He said, 'I will be lifted up' (v32) to 'indicate the kind of death he was to die' (v33). The cross with all its gruesome reality was ahead of him. A public, humiliating, excruciating death.

No wonder he said: "Now my soul is troubled" (v27).

Jesus likens what's ahead of him to being like 'a grain of wheat that falls into the earth and dies... [and through it] bears much fruit'(v24). Jesus knew that the cross wasn't his ultimate destination, new life for him and the whole world was. Jesus carried these two realities. He knew the gruesome reality of the cross and he also knew the wonderful reality of the new life to come.

As Christians, we straddle these two realities too. On the one hand we experience the pain and suffering of our present time. Yet, on the other hand, we also know that there is new life in Christ, that we have hope in a future destination.

I wonder how well you straddle these two realities? It can be easy, especially in covid times and with what we witness through the news, to feel despairing. Sometimes it feels that death, with the pain and suffering that accompanies it, may have the victory after all. Similarly, we can go to the other extreme and try to pretend that pain and suffering doesn't affect us and convince ourselves that everything is fine because of our faith.

It's a bit like those pictures you get where some people will look at it and see one thing, and others will look at it and see another.



In this example some people will see an older woman and for others a younger woman. I wonder what you see? The reality is that it contains both of these images, we just may be prone to focus on one more than the other.

In John's gospel, we see Jesus hold the tension well. He is realistic about the torment he is feeling, he doesn't seek to hide it or dumb it down. And he also has a hope in a destination beyond it, that keeps him going despite the cost.

Jesus, while at his most troubled, displayed trust in his Father. We read in the passage that the Father speaks audibly, and we are told this is for the sake of the crowd. Jesus knew his Father's voice intimately. Words that would have comforted him and sustained him, throughout his ministry and at troubled times like these. Likewise, we too do not

journey alone, Jesus is present with us through his life-giving Spirit. He too speaks words of comfort to us and words to sustain us through tough times.

I remember a time when I had felt God call me to leave my job and go back to university to study theology. I was obedient, I gave up my job, which also meant moving out of the home I owned and back in with my parents. I was thirty at the time, so it felt quite costly, but I was sure it was what God was asking me to do.

After the three amazing years, I left and started applying to jobs, including jobs I was overqualified for and I was struggling to get one. After a few months I got to a point of being quite disillusioned, angry and questioning my own self-worth. I had been obedient and for what, just to be abandoned now? In my wrestling which I was taking to Jesus, I became aware of his presence with me, a sense of his peace filling me and him reassuring me that it would be OK. That encounter changed everything, my outlook shifted, I now had a sense of hope and was reminded to trust him. I wonder if you have had similar experiences of God ministering to you and reassuring you at a troubled time in your life?

This is what we see between the Father and the Son. The Father's words are uttered at the right time, reminding Jesus that he is not alone, revealing intimate relationship of trust.

***What then shall we take away from the gospel passage?***

Firstly, that like Jesus we live in two realities, the reality of the pain and torment of the here and now, and the reality of the promise and hope of abundant life to come.

And secondly, that like Jesus, we are not abandoned, he is present with us, ready to comfort and assure us through his Spirit. We can trust and hope in him. Amen.