Matins Passion Sunday

The Archdeacon of Oxford

Today is Passion Sunday, the 5th Sunday of Lent. It’s the time when we begin to focus our attention on the Passion of Christ, meaning his giving of himself for others on the Cross. Giving himself to humiliation, terrible suffering and death because that was what he felt called to do. If passion is about feeling, then Passion Sunday is about strong feeling being put into resolute action.

I spend some time, most days in this wonderful space. Gradually I get to know the people here, and also the monuments and memorials to past generations who have prayed and wept and laughed in this place. Sometimes their passions are evident.

Frideswide, the Saxon princess and our patron saint. Buried in this place with her shrine in the Latin Chapel below a window telling the story of her life. Pursued by a man who wanted to take her as his wife, she had other ideas. She didn’t want to be the property of a man. She wanted to belong to Christ alone. That was her passion, and she put that strong feeling into resolute action right here. Setting up the first religious community on this very site.

Saints and then Scolars, like Henry Acland. His memorial is in the Chapel of Remembrance. It reads:

To the Glory of God and in loving memory Henry Wentworth Acland Honorary student of this House, for many years Regius Professor of Medicine in this University, Radcliffe Librarian and Physician to the Radcliffe Infirmary. With faith in God, simplicity and earnestness, purity of motive, and tenderness of heart, he dedicated his long life to the prevention and relief of the bodily and mental sufferings of mankind. Born 1815. Died 1900 and laid to rest beside his beloved wife, Sarah.

Acland was a scientist and a Christian. Someone who helped generations of students to study natural sciences here in Oxford.

He would hear a bible passage like the one we heard today,

‘Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and stars for light at night…’

And hear it as as an invitation to study the natural world with all its mystery and all its beauty. He had a passion for that.
‘I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.’

His faith in the God lies within and beyond all things also gave him a passion to help others. He dedicated his life to the unglamorous world of public health, fighting cholera here in Oxford, improving working and living conditions for thousands. Aided in all things by his beloved wife Sarah who opened their house in Broad Street to and endless procession of friends and house guests, from John Ruskin to student nurses, from Isambard Brunel to young chimney sweeps. The passionate feelings of a man and wife for each other, and for humanity, put into resolute action for the good of all.

Then there is The Passion of a Soldier, rememberd on a slab in the floor that most people walk over but never read:

Here lies the body of the valiant and most worthy gentleman, Sir John Smith, of Wootton Wawen in the County of Warwick. Descended from the ancient family of Michael Carington Standard Bearer to Richard 1st in the Holy Land. With his own hands redeemed in the battle of Edge-Hill the Banner Royal of his sacred majesty Charles 1st. For which signal valour he received, in the field, the honour of knighthood from His Majesty. Since which time, in several battles gave singular testimony of his loyalty and courage especially in the memorable fight at Bramdean where having received several wounds in pursuit of victory died at Andover. He was on 1st April 1644 interred here with great solemnity. Aged 28.

‘unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies it remains a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit.’

His Passion, his strong feelings put into such resolute action bore fruit in the gratitude his actions aroused. He was surely remembered not just in a grave slab, but in the unknown lives of countless others who were influenced for good by the bravery of this young man.

And finally, The Passion of a Poet: who seeks to give public expression to the thoughts and feelings, fears and doubts that churn away beneath the skin of us all,

‘Now is my soul troubled..’, Jesus says in today’s gospel. The very stuff of a poet. ‘And what should I say, Father save me from this hour? No it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ‘Father glorify your name.’

Out of a poet’s soul troubling can come forth truth and grace; understanding and a strange beauty. WH Auden has a memorial here, in the very spot where as an old man he sat during services. In one poem he reflects on an
old master painting showing the story of Icarus as he falls from the sky to his death:

About suffering they were never wrong,
The old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position: how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along:
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

The Saint, Scholar, the Soldier, the Poet. Each one living out their very own, very human life to the glory of God. Each one channelling strong feeling into resolute action.

Jesus inspired each one in their own way.

That one solitary life. That one unknown Palestinian Jew... Put to death in a far off corner of the Roman empire... as bored soldiers diced for his clothes.

Put to death,

Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.
We celebrate today the Passion of Jesus, who knowing what was waiting for him, still turned his face resolutely towards Jerusalem.

Jesus the scholar who considered the lilies of the field, the birds of the air, the action of yeast in dough; who searched the scriptures with the old men in the Temple, yet dared to challenge their dogma.

Jesus who knew a soldier’s dread in the Garden of Gethsemane, and still went forward to do battle with the powers of hell.

Jesus the poet, putting into words and actions the ineffable love of God that lies within and beyond all things. Jesus whose very life was poetic as the living Word of almighty God.

The Saint, the Scholar, the Soldier, the Poet. Each one living out their very own, human life to the glory of God.

Each one in their own way following their Profession as Baptised Christians as the Book of Common Prayer puts it:

‘Remember always, that Baptism doth represent unto us our profession; which is, to follow the example of our Saviour Christ, and to be made like unto him.’

Brothers and Sisters, as the baptised people of God we are called to a Passionate life. Putting strong feeling into resolute action.

Where might that ...take you... today?