Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 8:30am Livestreamed Mass – 700 words

This fifth Sunday of Lent was traditionally known as Passion Sunday, the beginning of Passiontide, and it was on this day that the images in our churches were veiled. That custom arose because of the gospel for today in the Extraordinary Form, the old Latin Mass, where it says that they picked up stones to throw at Jesus, but he hid himself and went out of the temple – his hour had not yet come. No, his “hour” would not come until Good Friday, and thus, in the sacred liturgy, we have the solemn unveiling of the cross here in the “temple”, the church, as Christ dies not from stoning but from our sins.

We have long observed the tradition of veiling the images here at St. Paul’s, so it’s perhaps jarring not to see them covered today. But this year is different. Yes, there is the simple, practical reason that we could not assemble our usual team of volunteers to put up all the veils. But there is a deeper, spiritual reason that we can perceive in it also: for we feel as though Christ hid himself from us a little earlier this time – on March 17th, St. Patrick’s Day, in fact, when the suspension of public worship went into effect. Yes, from that day it has felt in some ways as if the social distancing included our Lord also.

The challenge for us this Lent is to pierce through the veil with the eyes of faith. Though we may not receive Christ sacramentally, in holy communion, he is still very much with us. Without downplaying the supreme importance of the Holy Eucharist, we recognize that our Lord is not bound by it – it is not the only way he is present to us. He still comes to us, though in a more hidden way at this time. So we make our spiritual communion as we pray; we invite him into our heart, as into a temple, where we do not wish to pick up stones to throw at him, but to console him, for he suffers along with his people.

This suffering-with – this compassion – was most evident in today’s gospel. “And Jesus wept”. He experienced and expressed the full range of emotions of the human condition, for he was fully man. He wept because of the reality of death, which has so afflicted us, as a consequence for sin. He wept because his beloved friend, Lazarus, had died – and we understand this well, for the mystery of death shakes us to the core, as we behold a lifeless body that before we had embraced as fully alive. He wept because his good friends mourned. And perhaps his weeping also included the knowledge of what he would suffer when his hour did come.

Our Lord Jesus Christ weeps because of this trial that we now experience, also. This was not God’s original plan for us. The Lord never intended for us to suffer in this way – whether it be the fairly minor inconveniences and changes that most of us are facing, or the terrible suffering and even death caused by a virus that others are going through. This is all the consequence of sin, and so Jesus weeps, because he knows that he dies for this also. But his weeping is not hopeless: he knows the end of the story, as do we. He weeps and we do also; it is all not easy. But the certainty of the resurrection awaits.

Our psalm said, “I trust in the Lord… More than sentinels wait for the dawn, let Israel wait for the Lord.” This is our task now – to wait patiently for the Lord. With him “there is mercy and fullness of redemption”. He will save us from this – we will get through it. But we see him weeping: do we try to console him? Do we take advantage of the sacrament of confession, which remains available, to repent from our sins? Do we double down on prayer, seeking him out, who is always accessible to us in spirit? We see Jesus weeping – let us console him, making the best of this trial, as we await the dawn – the resurrection. Amen.