

Tuesday in Holy Week

7th April 2020

Dear Friends in Christ,

'Jesus, grant us the eyes and heart to see You, in and through all things.'
(Colossians 3)

I am sitting at 10pm on Monday, about to completely rewrite my planned Tuesday reflection in light of Boris Johnson's admission to Intensive Care earlier in the evening. I have also been simultaneously cooking a late supper for my 24 year old son, who is needing to remain in social isolation, even from me in the precarious nature of my ministry; and responding to many parishioners' social media messages of support and encouragement, and in the sharing with me of their concerns – either for their own health status or that of their loved ones. All the while, *'Eric'* the pheasant and various rather lively owls have been loudly trying to out-do each other in the Churchyard! Just goes to show that in the current climate, all is change ... yet, in and through all these experiences, I have felt God's peace with us! As I have sat writing in the beauty and stillness of candle-light, I have been listening to a fabulous recording by Ólafur Arnalds and Alice Sara Ott playing Chopin's *'Raindrop'* Prelude in D flat Major - sublime! I have lifted our world and its people to the healing love of Christ, in the knowledge that our Benefice Prayer Chain, whatever their personal politics, has also been activated to pray for our Prime Minister. Here, in and through the gossamer threads of our earthly and sacred connections, the face of Christ is.



With all the experiences of this eventful evening and the memories of Holy Land Pilgrimages-past whirling through my head, an image has settle in my mind. I see Jesus on the Via Dolorosa, inching in agony carrying His Cross from His sentencing towards Calvary, blessed by Veronica, who, so moved by pity for Jesus, steps forward from the baying crowd to tenderly wipe the bruised and bleeding face of her Messiah.

Veronica is said to have wiped the blood and sweat off Jesus' face with her veil, onto which the image of Jesus' face became imprinted on the cloth.

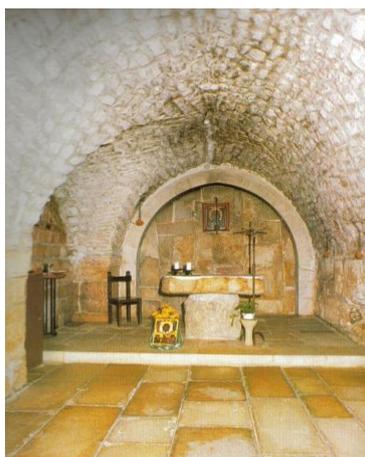
This event is contentious! The story of Jesus meeting Veronica doesn't appear in any scripture, yet its anecdotal verity has passed down the generations and is venerated in many Christian denominations as being the 6th Station of the Cross.

In October 2014, my daughter Eleanor and I were unexpectedly caught in a military lockdown whilst staying at the Austrian Hospice in Jerusalem's Old City. There had been a stabbing at the Al Aqsa Mosque. Tensions were high. Suddenly, the Temple Mount area was a sea of armed Israeli militia – terrifying and fascinating all at once!

During this time, Eleanor and I were on the Via Dolorosa at the Sixth Station: The Chapel of the Holy Face, in the place where Veronica is said to have ministered to Jesus. A frightened Roman Catholic nun pulled us through a nondescript wooden door into the sanctuary of an exquisite Chapel. We did not speak each other's language, but eventually found we had French in common. As we talked and prayed together, we watched her return to making a beautiful version of Rublev's Icon. Her skilled hands worked tenderly over the image. As we sat together in stillness, we were filled with peace, and I realised this tiny, holy woman had become Veronica to us.



Station VI – Veronica



Chapel of The Holy Face



Rublev's Icon

The name 'Veronica' comes from two Latin words, 'vera' and 'icona' meaning 'true image.' For a long time there was no definitive account of Jesus' life, and anyone wanting to get a clearer, more reliable picture as to who He was could only do so by listening to the many voices of the early Church community. In this way, the story of Veronica remains anecdotal, yet the power of her loving action continues to this day.

Jesus, grant us the eyes and heart to see You, in and through all things.'

Veronica acted out of love, seemingly not caring about the consequences of her actions. In the current Coronavirus crisis, we have seen this same loving response in the selfless actions of many front-line NHS staff and other equally selfless Carers, Refuse Collectors, Supermarket staff, Teachers, Farmers, Pickers, Funeral Directors, Neighbours. The list goes on. More than that, so does the selfless love! In these acts of generosity and tender kindness to the other we are blessed to see the face of Christ.

In this reflection, I wonder what we would have done in Veronica's situation? In the clamour and violence of the crowd watching Jesus dragging His cross towards Calvary, would we have stayed hidden? Or, like Veronica, might we have responded to the humility of Christ?

During the Coronavirus pandemic, it is gratifying to see that tens of thousands of people across the world have, like Veronica, responded to the greater needs of others. Many are beginning to pray that the positive benefits of this global pandemic continue beyond Coronavirus. Could we be equal? Could our society truly put the needs of the vulnerable, isolated and poor before our predilection for status and power? Veronica's story, however factually spurious it might be, offers us both theological and philosophical questions to answer as we journey to the Cross. Veronica was concerned with the face of Jesus. As Christians, can we say the same? Do we concern ourselves with the face of Christ in the busyness of our daily lives?

Jesus, grant us the eyes and heart to see You, in and through all things.'

If we are genuinely Christian, our concern for the face of Jesus will instinctively push us towards loving, compassionate, selfless action in our suffering world. The story of Veronica is testament to the reality of counter-cultural self-giving when we concern ourselves with living as Christ has taught us above all else.

With my love, on the journey,

Jax

Revd Jax Machin, Rector, The Downs Benefice

Prayer for Tuesday in Holy Week

Adapted from a prayer by Christian Poet, Malcolm Guite

Veronica Wipes the Face of Jesus

Bystanders and by-passers turn away
And wipe his image from their memory.
She keeps her station. She is here to stay
And stem the flow. She is the reliquary
Of his last look on her. The bloody sweat
And salt tears of his love are soaking through
The folds of her devotion, and the wet
folds of her handkerchief, like the dew
Of morning, like a softening rain of grace.
Because she wiped the grime from off his skin,
And glimpsed the Godhead in his human face -
Whose hidden image we all bear within,
Through all our veils and shrouds of daily pain ...
The face of God is shining once again.

Post Script On Wordsworth

On a somewhat unrelated note, today marks the 250th Anniversary of the birth of the Lakeland poet, William Wordsworth.

His beloved home, Dove Cottage, is a house on the edge of Grasmere near Ambleside.

Many of us in the Benefice were looking forward to visiting the area this June for our biennial trip to Rydall Hall Christian Retreat Centre. The Hall sits next door to Dove Cottage. Sadly, Rydall has had to close its doors because of Coronavirus. But we very much look forward to our rescheduled visit in the Spring of 2021.

As a little salve in the wait, below is a poem, written by Wordsworth in 1802, which describes London in the early morning. Wordsworth's vision of London's serene beauty was composed on the roof of a coach – the poet was evidently en route to France to meet his illegitimate daughter, Caroline, for the first time.

Eerily, the most famous poem about London in the English language, written by a poet who ordinarily hated cities, could very easily have been describing London – and every other town and city - in this current Coronavirus pandemic!

Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802

William Wordsworth

Earth has not any thing to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!