

**PASSION SUNDAY 2023**  
**St George's Windsor**

**I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.** These are words of Jesus recorded in this morning's second reading. **I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.**

I think it unlikely that many people in this Chapel today will have read through the Book of Numbers – the fourth book of the Old Testament. If any had done so, they would have come across a story that sounds strange to the modern ear. The children of Israel had rebelled against God and Moses in the wilderness. God, as a punishment, had afflicted them with a plague of poisonous snakes. Understandably, the people were quick to repent. God therefore commanded Moses to make a bronze serpent and hold it up over the people in order to bring about their healing.

The story is alluded to in St John's Gospel Chapter 3 where Jesus says, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." Jesus must be 'lifted up', lifted up upon the cross, for the healing of the people. The allusion is continued in today's reading. **I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.** It is to the cross that people will be drawn to discover true healing. But in what does this 'healing' consist?

It is hard to grasp the fact that, more than a year into the conflict, the Russian assault on Ukraine continues. This is only one of a large number of examples, examples that any one of us would be able to cite, of the fact that there is much unkindness in the human heart and that, terrifyingly, all too often that unkindness hardens into a political or religious system of oppression. Apparently decent folk become numbed and brutalised and carelessly abuse their brothers and their sisters. It is of an ever-hardening unkindness that we need to be healed.

Somehow, it seems that oppressive regimes carry within them the seeds of their own destruction. Time and again something better in the human spirit rebels and challenges, and great edifices that you would have thought would last for ever suddenly collapse. We do glimpse real human possibilities, and have some reason to hope. But the victory is never final and, in no time at all, in some other neck of the woods, the unkindness of the human heart hardens and solidifies into yet another system of religious or political tyranny. You begin to wonder whether it will ever end.

In an attempt to stem the flow of the unkindness of the human heart, to protect ourselves from ourselves, and to shape a better future, we devise many laws. Certainly, in our own society, in order to preserve the sort of life that might be seen as 'civilised', we are awash with them. But legislation, while perhaps important in the short term, only ever curbs and contains the effects of the unkindness of the human heart; it does not bring about a cure.

In the end, it is a cure we want; something deeper than the tampering with symptoms. We know it is the human heart that needs to be transformed, transfigured, transmuted, transposed into another key, and healed. A sort of spiritual surgery in the human heart is required.

Today is known as Passion Sunday, a day on which we are invited to begin to focus our attention especially on the final days of the life of Jesus, and on the Cross that marks the end of them. Passion Sunday's invitation is extended for the simple reason that, down through the centuries, countless Christian men and women have claimed to have perceived, through the Cross of Christ, at least a hint of remedy; some possibility of cure for the human heart.

At one level of course, to remember the Cross of Christ, is to confront again the effects of the unkindness of the human heart in the oppressive abuse of power that brought Jesus to his cruel death.

Yet, at another level, we see in the man Jesus on the Cross that 'something better' in the human spirit rebelling, challenging and, in astonishing love and forgiveness, rising above cruel and downward-dragging forces; promising real human possibilities; giving reason for hope.

But there is yet a third level. It is at this level, perhaps, that we begin to see what might be the cure for the unkindness of the human heart; something to effect the longed-for transformation.

In a poem by the Welsh priest-poet R. S. Thomas, a poem called **In a Country Church**, the poet describes a man kneeling in silence. In his prayer, he is obviously meditating on the Cross. Thomas writes:

He kneeled long.  
And saw love in a dark crown  
Of thorns blazing.....

The man at prayer perceives the Cross as a wonderful revelation of the love of God; the lengths that God will go to in searching out his children. In the outstretched arms of Christ, he sees the divine embrace.

Love in a dark crown  
Of thorns blazing.....

I emphasise 'the man at prayer' because the insight does not come through logical calculation, but rather through the religious imagination. But it is a gift shared by a host of Christian people; this seeing of the depths of the love of God in and through the Cross of Christ.

The seeing of this "Love in a dark crown / Of thorns blazing....." changes us, and goes on changing us, softening the hardness of the human heart. In the Cross, we find some kind of healing. The responsibility that you and I share is to hold on to that 'vision' of the love of God for the sake of a world whose heart is far too hard.

In the face of all that hardening of human unkindness into great systems of oppression throughout the world, the transformation of any single heart seems ludicrously modest and surely not to be taken seriously. Am I not just commending quiet withdrawal from the world? By no means! I really want to play a part in the changing of the world. It is simply that I can see no other way by which love (the love of God) will ever seep into that world to soften it than by the channel of the single human heart. I place my confidence in that. And I see it as our particular and special business to guard the vision that might yet work a million tiny miracles

**I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.**