



CAVERSHAM THAMESIDE
AND MAPLEDURHAM
ST PETER | ST MARGARET | ST JOHN

HOMILY for 5th Sunday of Lent, 29/03/2020

Mike Smith

John 11:1-45

Today marks the start of Passiontide, the annual fortnight where the church focuses on Jesus' journey to the cross. And here on Passion Sunday, Martha of Bethany stands at the centre of today's Gospel reading.

She is the patron saint of Tarascon in the south of France. Legend has it that she confronted and tamed a dragon that was terrorising the townspeople. The Tarasque, as the monster was called, is described as having a lion's head, six short legs, an ox-like body covered with a turtle shell, and a scaly tail that ended in a scorpion's sting. It must have been quite a sight to behold! Elsewhere it is reported as living where the Château Tarascon now stands, on a rock in the middle of the river. In this account it is described as "a dragon, half animal, half fish, thicker than an ox, longer than a horse, with teeth like swords and big as horns". This creature "hid in the river where he took the life of all passers-by and submerged vessels". The king had challenged the dragon but had not succeeded in killing it. When St Martha arrived she confronted the beast and tamed it with hymns and prayers, before leading it to the city. Sadly, the people were still terrified of it, and attacked and killed it. Martha then preached to them and converted many of them to Christianity. In their remorse, the townspeople changed the town's name to Tarascon.

Today's Gospel reading is long and powerful and brings us right into the heart of Passiontide at every level. There are many people and voices within it, and one who stands out from the crowd is Martha, a woman whom Jesus loved. She speaks here in the immediate moments after her beloved brother has died. She has longed for Jesus to come and make him well, but he hasn't. The worst has happened.

When Jesus does arrive, Martha opens her heart to him. She gives him both her grief and her faith. For Martha the two things do not cancel each other out, but co-exist. In Martha we see a woman in the midst of grief, standing in a place of faith. In today's passage she makes two extraordinary statements. First, in verses 21 and 22, she tells Jesus: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Then, in verse 27,

she makes an astonishing statement of faith: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

Yet, Church history being what it is, we have placed much more emphasis on Peter's declaration of faith than on Martha's. But hers is just as great, if not greater, especially given the experience that she speaks out of.

We may not be able to tame a dragon, as Martha does in the legend, and our faith may pale into insignificance in comparison with the unshakeable, direct faith that she demonstrates in the Gospel passage. Yet she can be an inspiration to us in a number of ways, teaching us how to tame our own inner monsters.

As most of us are now firmly stuck in our homes - apart from the occasional trip out for shopping or a walk - some of those inner monsters may be beginning to show themselves! You know your own, as I do mine. The monsters might be irritability, depression, fear, or many others. These monsters can be infrequent visitors, or they might come to dominate who we are and how we live most days. For many of us these weeks and months locked away at home need to be a time when we prioritise looking after our inner wellbeing. Communicating with other people is key to that, as well as ensuring that we challenge the inner monster in us and provide a counter narrative. As Coronavirus (Covid-19) now takes hold throughout our country tensions in each one of us will inevitably rise. People we know will get sick, and some may die. Passiontide is a time for firstly acknowledging this tension, and then secondly bringing it to Christ's cross.

For one thing, we can be certain that, even though the worst is now happening in our world - a wide spread pandemic illness - whatever that may represent in our own life, Christ *will* be with us. In addition, we can know that, even in the darkest moments, we can boldly stand before God and express our doubts and disappointments alongside our hope and faith, without being afraid or ashamed of thinking wrong thoughts. It is safe to open our heart to Jesus even when all seems lost and our feelings are mixed. Clarity and firmness of purpose can exist even in the confusion of grief and loss.

In this time of stress, anxiety and fear we might find our life experience too difficult to make faith seem possible. Martha shows us another way. She knows that, standing before her, despite what has happened, is the Lord of heaven and earth. In one hand she holds her life, with all its pain and bereavement, and in the other she holds her faith in God. God is still God. Faith is still faith. The path continues.