

21st March 2021 – Fifth Sunday in Lent

Time

“I grant you I was down and out of breath; and so was he; but we rose both at an instant and fought a long hour by Shrewsbury clock.”

William Shakespeare, Henry IV, Part I

Henry, Prince of Wales, has just killed Henry Percy in battle. Sir John Falstaff had been feigning death, and, when he rises, Prince Henry is pontificating on his success in killing Percy. But Falstaff wants to take credit for killing Percy himself. So he recounts a long tale of a bloody fight, culminating in the final throes during “a long hour by Shrewsbury clock”. This fanciful account causes John of Lancaster to say, “This is the strangest tale that ever I heard.” It was strange indeed, and Falstaff knew it. But he tries to give his account an air of authenticity by indicating that he’s timed the final “long hour” of his fight by the hands on the “Shrewsbury clock”.

As we come to the Fifth Sunday of Lent, I have to say I find the Lenten journey *much* more than a “long hour”. Forty days to get ready for Easter? Who needs it? And if Lent is a struggle normally, how much more is it a struggle in this year of Covid restrictions? If it was *only* timed by the Shrewsbury clock it might be OK. But it’s timed not by hours, but by days, weeks, months, for goodness’ sake. Too long altogether, it feels.

In Psalm 13 the psalmist also asks, “How long?” He’s complaining to God and struggling to make sense of everything. God has forsaken him. There are no answers to his woes. Have you ever felt like that? I know I have, and when I have to drag myself through Lent or any other time of self-examination, I too have cried – and still do – “How long, O Lord?” But, in a remarkable way, it’s when the psalmist is honest with his God that he feels God is closer. Maybe – just maybe – it’s when he rests from his battles that he knows the truth of God’s presence. Perhaps because he stops to complain, maybe even being inclined to give up, he knows God is near.

But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.

I will sing the LORD’s praise, for he has been good to me.

Lent can feel much more than “a long hour by Shrewsbury clock”. So, complain all you need to. And then rest a while, and know God is near you.

A prayer for today

God of all the years, whatever time I have, may it be used well for your purposes.

Whatever time I waste, may you use it better than I did. Amen

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