

**A sermon preached at St Andrew's Church Soham on Passion Sunday 2019 by The Revd Eleanor Whalley, Vicar.
Isaiah 43: 8-12; Psalm 126; John 12: 1-8**

May I speak and may we hear in the name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last Thursday,

when I was rushing round the house

trying to tidy up,

I caught a snippet of Radio 4's Today Programme.

Nick Robinson was interviewing the curator

of a new exhibition that has just opened at the British Museum.

The exhibition is called 'Edvard Munch: Love and Angst'.

The centrepiece of that exhibition, I heard, is a painting.

It's a painting many of us will have seen.

The painting is called 'The Scream'.

In that painting a man holds his hands over his ears;

his mouth is wide open.

His whole body, and particularly his face, is twisted.

The lines of his body reflect the distorted contours of the sky;

They reflect the contours of the fiord

under the bridge on which he's standing.

If you want cheering up this Passiontide,

this probably isn't the painting for you.

On the Today Programme, the curator of the exhibition explained

that whilst Munch called his painting 'The Scream',

it isn't the man who is screaming –

or at least it's not just the man.

In 1895, Munch explained the experience

behind the image.

He was walking, he said, with two friends:

walking across the Norwegian Fjords –

over a bridge in Oslo.

Above him, he saw a blood red sky, and the vision of that sky filled him with anxiety.

'I felt the great scream pass through nature': that's what he said afterwards.

The experience haunted him for years.

It haunted him so much that an artist friend advised him to get it out – to paint what he'd seen.

That's how the painting came to be.

I've not been able to forget that phrase:

'I felt the great scream pass through nature'.

What Munch felt was more than a personal scream –

more than his own scream –

more than the scream of any one individual.

He felt a 'great scream' -

a scream running through nature,

a scream tearing through the earth.

He felt, I'd say, the scream of humanity,

the scream of parched lands,

the scream of polluted oceans,

the scream of those places where war wreaks destruction:

all that is 'The Scream' of his painting.

That struck me because at Passiontide, from today until Good Friday,

we're drawn deeper and deeper into the heart of Christ's scream –

closer to the heart of his suffering and agony; deeper into the darkness of the world Christ came to save.

Today's readings all contain some kind of scream.

Our first reading sounds optimistic – it is optimistic: 'I am going to do a new thing,' says God;

But those words were written in the context of the Israelites' captivity in Babylon:

In times that were 'the former things' they'd rather forget.

God's people then were exiles, driven from their homeland;

they were hoping and praying for better times to come.

That's what our psalm picks up:

'Turn our captivity, O Lord: as the rivers in the south/They that sow in tears: shall reap in joy.'

That's the hope of the psalmist – the hope of our faith –

but for God's people then, as for so many people today
returning home,
reaping in joy
must seem a far-off prospect.

John, the writer of today's Gospel,
was no stranger to darkness.

A dominant theme of John's prologue -
that great Gospel reading we hear at Christmas -
is the battle between darkness and light:
'the light shines in darkness'

In today's Gospel, John records a domestic scene -
Jesus drops in on his friends in Bethany,
but darkness is there in the subtext:
Jesus visits, John tells us, 'six days before the Passover'.
We know what the Passover will bring.
Judas Iscariot is present.
It's not the last time we'll hear his name.
John lays that on this: 'Judas Iscariot, who was to betray him'.

Jesus' friends are simple people:
Mary and Martha live at home with their brother, Lazarus.
Lazarus, John has told us earlier, is 'weak'.
Some translations say 'sick'.
Lazarus is feeble - maybe he's disabled.
He's somehow prevented from living on his own.
Maybe there's a double-meaning in that difficult truth:
'The poor you will always have with you'.
Do the poor include Lazarus, the man we've heard 'Jesus loved' -
the friend he brought back to life?
In that home, amidst the love and the care, perhaps, there's a quiet scream -
a sense of lament for what might have been.

Into this place of love and broken dreams,
into this home where nerves are on edge,
and people are oppressed by a sense of foreboding,
Mary brings a jar of perfume.

What she does next is outrageous,
extravagant,
intimate:

she, a woman, wipes Jesus's feet with her hair.

She pours costly perfume all over his feet.

No wonder Judas objects.

And yet Mary's act – Mary's scandalous act of overflowing love
is the only act that can make itself heard in and through that great scream.

Only love can cut through the darkness.

'Leave her alone,' says Jesus, 'She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial'.

Jesus know what is coming next –

and Mary knows too.

Mary is already prepared,

and being prepared herself, she's now prepared Jesus: she's anointed his body for burial.

Jesus is days away from that even more loving of acts – that even more extravagant of acts.

Jesus will pour out not perfume but his life

And that life, wrote John, is the light of the world.

The light that darkness 'cannot overcome' –

the light that darkness 'has not understood'.

Love – and only love – will keep shining – up to and beyond the end.

I'm going to close with a prayer. You might want to make it your own prayer:

Dear Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, I hold up:
all my weakness to your strength,
all my failure to your faithfulness,
all my sinfulness to your perfection,
all my loneliness to your compassion;
my little pains to your great agony on the cross. **Amen.**