

Earlier this week we witnessed a rare spectacle (unless we found ourselves under cover of cloud) – a near complete solar eclipse. Even if we did not see the full spectacle, the sky got darker, it got cooler – and you could see why earlier societies, without our scientific understanding of the process, would have been very much in awe of this sudden, unexpected darkening of the sun.

I recalled the time of the last eclipse that was seen in this part of the world in 1999. As it so happened we were in France, travelling back to the boat for the trip home. The road we were travelling followed the path of the eclipse. As the time of the eclipse approached, the French police ordered all cars into the motorway car parks. We found ourselves next to a group of Germans who had travelled down specially. They were equipped with a telescope that projected the image of the sun onto a screen and many of us watched this amazing spectacle – all except one 9 year old English girl, who was resolutely swinging on a swing. As the eclipse moved towards totality, her mother called to her to come across and see the image on the screen. ‘Mummy, can you not see that I am busy!’

The significance of the event was completely lost on her – I would suspect that this week, somewhere in England, a woman in her early twenties has heard this story repeated over and over again.

Then of course yesterday there were three matches, promising three different outcomes for the RBS Rugby Six Nations. And let’s not forget the women’s rugby team today. The outcome of these matches will have huge implications for the teams, for the players and for future sponsorship.

Each of these, the eclipse, the Six Nations matches have been keenly anticipated. Our newspapers, our TV screens have given detailed analysis that

heightened our sense of anticipation, that had even the most sceptical keeping an eye on TV screens, on the sky, on the news headlines.

I want to run with these themes of anticipation and significance. Our Old Testament lesson from Jeremiah, written in a time of Exile, speaks of anticipation. As he wrote, Jerusalem was in ruins, her leaders in Babylon. This was a crucial period for the people. The old certainties of Temple worship, of the covenant, their understanding of themselves as the People of God seemed in tatters. It is out of this experience of loss and alienation that the great prophets spoke. As we read in our lesson this morning they spoke words of hope, of new beginnings, speaking again in terms of covenant:

<sup>33</sup>But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

This expectation of hope, of new beginnings began to find expression in the idea of a new David, a messianic figure who would restore the Kingdom of Israel, who would rescue Israel from her enemies, who would bring in God's reign on earth.

Moving forward to the time of Jesus, there was a mood of expectation in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine with revolts being centred around a number of figures who lead people in failed uprisings against the Romans.

It is into this environment that the figure of Jesus comes to minister. As we read the Gospel accounts of his ministry, we encounter a man who made a profound impression on those who came to hear him, to be healed by him, to challenge him. We encounter a man with a very clear awareness of who he is as he speaks of God as his Father, who announces forgiveness of sins. As we are drawn into the story through the reading of the Gospel, as the story moves

towards Jerusalem, we begin to see the forthcoming drama of trial, of cross and resurrection as Jesus speaks of approaching events in terms of decision.

<sup>25</sup>Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. <sup>26</sup>Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

Who is this Jesus of Nazareth? The religious authorities of his day decided he was a danger to be done away with. Those who followed him, who saw him teach and heal, who experienced the trauma of his suffering and death came to see him as none other than the Christ.

Who is this Jesus of Nazareth? That son of the Church of Ireland, C.S. Lewis, who himself struggled against this whole of idea of faith before becoming, in his own words, the most miserable convert in the whole of England said this in a war time radio broadcast:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. ... Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God'

*C.S. Lewis 'Mere Christianity'*

I began by thinking of the significance of events, significance of people. May we, as Good Friday and Easter approach, recognise the truth of Lewis' words: 'however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God' – and fall down and worship.