

Friday 23 February 2024

St Polycarp



Ruins in ancient Smyrna

In Greek, the name 'polycarp' means 'much fruit.'

Polycarp was considered to be one of the first Christian martyrs. He had been Bishop of Smyrna on the Adriatic coast of Asia Minor for over forty years when the persecution of Christians began. He was arrested and given the opportunity to renounce his faith and so save his life. His response was: 'I have been Christ's servant for eighty-six years and he has done me no harm. Can I now blaspheme my King and my Saviour?' He was immediately burnt at the stake; this martyrdom occurred in the year 155 AD. His remains were gathered together and buried outside the city; thus began the practice of celebrating the Eucharist over his burial place on the anniversary of his death, a practice which also grew over the martyrs' tombs in the Roman catacombs.

Sermon © Nicola Williams.

Liturgy and prayers of intercession © 2000 The Archbishops' Council.

Bible readings © the publishers of the NRSV translation.

The liturgy assumes the service is Eucharistic. The prayers of consecration appear at the end.

The hymns are YouTube links. To hear the hymns please click on the links.

To see service transcripts from previous weeks, please visit the page,

<http://www.medlockhead.co.uk/resources/index.htm>

Introduction and welcome

HYMN 1 [Come holy ghost, our souls inspire](#) (click here to hear the hymn)

The Welcome

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit

All Amen.

The Lord be with you

All And also with you.

The Preparation

**All Almighty God,
to whom all hearts are open,
all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hidden:
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy name;
through Christ our Lord. Amen.**

Our Lord Jesus Christ said:

The first commandment is this:

‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is the only Lord.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
with all your soul, with all your mind,
and with all your strength.’

And the second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’

There is no other commandment greater than these.

On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

All Amen. Lord, have mercy.

The saints were faithful unto death

and now dwell in the heavenly kingdom for ever.

As we celebrate their joy,

let us bring to the Lord our sins and weaknesses,
and ask for his mercy.

All **Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
we have sinned against you
and against our neighbour
in thought and word and deed,
through negligence, through weakness,
through our own deliberate fault.
We are truly sorry
and repent of all our sins.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
who died for us,
forgive us all that is past
and grant that we may serve you in newness of life
to the glory of your name.
Amen.**

Almighty God,
who forgives all who truly repent, have mercy upon you,
pardon and deliver you from all your sins,
confirm and strengthen you in all goodness,
and keep you in life eternal;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

All **Amen.**

The Gloria is omitted in Lent.

The Collect for Polycarp

Almighty God,
who gave to your servant Polycarp
boldness to confess the name of our Saviour Jesus Christ
before the rulers of this world
and courage to die for his faith:
grant that we also may be ready
to give an answer for the faith that is in us
and to suffer gladly for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

All **Amen.**

First reading

A reading from the Wisdom of Solomon

The righteous live forever, and their reward is with the Lord; the Most High takes care of them. Therefore they will receive a glorious crown and a beautiful diadem from the hand of the Lord, because with his right hand he will cover them, and with his arm he will shield them. The Lord will take his zeal as his whole armour, and will arm all creation to repel his enemies; he will put on righteousness as a breastplate, and wear impartial justice as a helmet; he will take holiness as an invincible shield, and sharpen stern wrath for a sword, and creation will join with him to fight against his frenzied foes. *Wisdom 5:15-20*

This is the Word of the Lord

All Thanks be to God.

Second reading

A reading from the Revelation of St John the Divine

One like the Son of Man said to me, "To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of the first and the last, who was dead and came to life: "I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death".' *Revelation 2:8-11*

This is the Word of the Lord

All Thanks be to God.

HYMN 2 Do not be afraid

(please click on this link to hear the hymn)

Gospel reading

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John

All **Glory to you O Lord.**

Jesus said to his disciples, 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.' *John 15:1-8*

This is the Gospel of the Lord

All **Praise to you O Christ.**

Sermon

As some of you may already know, I have an allotment and spend much of my time in the spring and summer, preparing, sowing, tending, weeding and, hopefully growing, produce. However, it is the fruit, rather than the veg, that is always the most bountiful.

Raspberries, strawberries and plums give and give and keep on giving to the point that we often have a glut of each. A little early tending, consistent watchfulness and, crucially, protection from pests is all that is needed for these amazing plants to provide masses of berries and fruits.

Polycarp—whose name means 'much fruit' in Greek—is considered one of the three chief 'Apostolic Fathers' of the early Church along with Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch. These men all, in their own way, fought for and managed to grow the Christian Faith in accordance with the teachings of the earlier apostles and their actions and teachings have led to a true glut of fruitfulness.

Polycarp is said to have been a disciple of the Apostle John who was a friend and witness of Jesus Christ Himself. Imagine having that link with Jesus the man, of being taught by someone who actually saw, touched, and spoke with Jesus on a

daily basis. Imagine how precious those stories would become—of the times that we don't know about, of conversations long forgotten and unrecorded when Jesus walked with his disciples, attended weddings, laughed, cried, and ate.

Polycarp knew that what the Apostle John had to say was precious. It needed tending, nurturing, and protecting if it was to grow and feed and educate the generations to come. But Polycarp lived in an extraordinary time; the Apostles themselves were dying and elderly, that connection with Christ could easily be severed and lost, or worse, corrupted, and misused. Polycarp and his contemporaries were at a crossroads, and they knew that the teaching they had to give needed to be correct and authentic. The pressure must have been huge.

We have eye-witnesses who speak of Polycarp and his teachings, they tell of a man who commanded respect in the very way he walked and held himself, let alone in what he had to say. And yet the man was humble, honest and, most likely, unable to read or write. However, here he is a Father of our Apostolic faith and surely, the provider of a fruitful harvest.

In modern times, we think of harvest and fruitfulness as things very much associated with food, and during our weekly grocery shop (where we are presented with thousands of products on supermarket shelves or market stalls) we probably tend to think little of where they have come from or how they were grown. We don't imagine the farmer's watchful waiting and the hours spent tilling the soil, adding the manure, and reaping the harvest. We simply pick what we want and make a meal.

The trouble is that making a meal worth eating will not happen unless we think carefully about the ingredients. And we cannot think just about the veg we want or the meat and fish, we need to think about how best to prepare it. It's no good taking a whole cabbage and putting it on hot coals or taking some beef and mixing it into an omelette it simply will not be nice to eat and will be ruined.

Faith is like that. We cannot just turn up to church on a Sunday and sit down to consume. That is like picking a grape and hoping for wine. If we are to be fruitful, to be nourished and to grow, we need to take time to think about what we are about to consume. We need to read the Bible, to pray and to do what we can to listen to the Holy Spirit and be guided in our lives. When we do that, we are treated to the most wonderful gift—we can feast with Christ and live our lives in the full knowledge that we are children of God!

But we need to know that our Bible—our teaching—is true. Polycarp gave us this. He and Clement and Ignatius contested for a true faith. They made sure their own teaching was sound, was biblical, and would ensure that generation after generation to come would have an honest faith. In this way, Polycarp was surely fruitful.

But our readings today are also about fire. Why? Because fire can be destructive; it can be lethal to all life and can devastate people and places. But not always. Fire can be a double-edged sword. It can also refine; it can strip back bark without killing a tree, and it can ensure that seeds can take root.

We do not know why Polycarp was put to death, but he did die a martyr. And by fire. Polycarp was given the opportunity to renounce his faith and save his life, but he refused and he refused to be nailed to his stake. Having had a vision from God, he simply said, 'God's will be done' and so he endured the fire.

Polycarp embodies what is spoken of in our reading today from St John the Divine ...

Do not fear what you are about to suffer and

Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Polycarp knew that he could be fruitful even in death. By his example of a man refusing to give up his faith, we too can know that our faith is the most precious thing we have. It needs constant tending, constant watching and constant care but what we gain is more than a glut. We are able to count ourselves co-heirs with Christ, sons and daughters of God. A faithful life is not always easy, and we sometimes need to feel pain in the knowledge that it will purify and refine us. In today's Gospel we are told that

Jesus said to his disciples, 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit'. and

Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

We will have branches that need pruning and there will be times when we feel the long winter fruitlessness but through faith, we can know that seasons change, and fruit will come and come in abundance.

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

Polycarp was a true martyr: he was the first martyr recorded after Stephen, but what he achieved, his giving of a true and sound faith, and his example of a faithful life is astounding. 2000 years later, we can know Jesus—of His earthly life, of His death and of His teachings—and we can be sure that what we are taught in the Bible is correct because he and others like him, lived and died for this precious Apostolic gift.

When I tend my allotment over the next few dark, damp and cold weeks, I will look forward to reaping my reward in berries, fruit and veg. There is always light ahead and with care and with dedication, we can know Christ more fully, more richly and more deeply and live a faithful, fruitful life.

The Creed

Do you believe and trust in God the Father,
the source of all being and life,
the one for whom we exist?

All We believe and trust in him.

Do you believe and trust in God the Son,
who took our human nature,
died for us and rose again?

All We believe and trust in him.

Do you believe and trust in God the Holy Spirit,
who gives life to the people of God
and makes Christ known in the world?

All We believe and trust in him.

This is the faith of the Church.

All This is our faith.

**We believe and trust in one God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.**

Prayers of intercession

We pray for strength to follow Jesus.
Saviour, we hear your call.

All Help us to follow.

Jesus said: 'Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant.'
Saviour, we hear your call.

All Help us to follow.

Jesus said: 'Unless you change
and become humble like little children,
you can never enter the kingdom of heaven.'
Saviour, we hear your call.

All Help us to follow.

Jesus said: 'Happy are the humble;
they will receive what God has promised.'
Saviour, we hear your call.

All Help us to follow.

Jesus said: 'Be merciful as your Father is merciful;
love your enemies and do good to them.'
Saviour, we hear your call.

All Help us to follow.

Jesus said: 'Love one another, as I love you;
there is no greater love than this,
to lay down your life for your friends.'
Saviour, we hear your call.

All Help us to follow.

Jesus said: 'Go to people everywhere
and make them my disciples,
and I will be with you always, to the end of time.'
Saviour, we hear your call.

All Help us to follow.

Merciful Father,

**All accept these prayers
for the sake of your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ.
Amen.**

The peace

Once we were far off,
but now in union with Christ Jesus we have been brought near through the
shedding of Christ's blood,
for he is our peace.

The peace of the Lord be always with you,

All And also with you.

HYMN 3 Cast your eyes upon Jesus ([click on this link to hear the hymn](#))

The liturgy of the Communion Service appears below

The Dismissal

God give you grace to follow his saints
in faith and love and steadfastness
and the blessing of God the Almighty:
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
be with you now and remain with you always.

All Amen.

HYMN 4 I cannot tell ([click on this link to hear the hymn](#))

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

All In the name of Christ. Amen.

The Liturgy of the Sacrament

Eucharistic Prayer (prayer E)

The Lord be with you

All and also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

All We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

All It is right to give thanks and praise.

It is indeed right and good,
our duty and our salvation,
always and everywhere to give you thanks,
holy Father, almighty and eternal God.
For following the example of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ,
your holy martyr Polycarp shed his blood for the glory of your name.
His death reveals your power made perfect in our human frailty.
You choose the weak and make them strong
in bearing witness to you
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
With joyful hearts we echo on earth
the song of the angels in heaven
as they praise your glory without end:

**All Holy, holy, holy Lord,
God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.**

We praise and bless you, loving Father,
through Jesus Christ, our Lord;
and as we obey his command,
send your Holy Spirit,
that broken bread and wine outpoured
may be for us the body and blood of your dear Son.

On the night before he died he had supper with his friends
and, taking bread, he praised you.

He broke the bread, gave it to them and said:
Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you;
do this in remembrance of me.

When supper was ended he took the cup of wine.
Again he praised you, gave it to them and said:
Drink this, all of you;
this is my blood of the new covenant,
which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.
Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.

So, Father, we remember all that Jesus did,
in him we plead with confidence his sacrifice made once for all upon the cross.

Bringing before you the bread of life and cup of salvation,
we proclaim his death and resurrection
until he comes in glory.

Great is the mystery of faith:

All Christ has died.
Christ is risen.
Christ will come again.

Lord of all life,
help us to work together for that day
when your kingdom comes
and justice and mercy will be seen in all the earth.

Look with favour on your people,
gather us in your loving arms
and bring us with Polycarp and all the saints
to feast at your table in heaven.

Through Christ, and with Christ, and in Christ,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
all honour and glory are yours, O loving Father,
for ever and ever.

All Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

As our Saviour taught us, so we pray

**All Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever. Amen.**

Breaking of the Bread

We break this bread to share in the body of Christ.

**All Though we are many, we are one body,
because we all share in one bread.**

**All Lamb of God,
you take away the sin of the world,
have mercy on us.**

**Lamb of God,
you take away the sin of the world,
have mercy on us.**

**Lamb of God,
you take away the sin of the world,
grant us peace.**

Draw near with faith.

Receive the body of our Lord Jesus Christ
which he gave for you,
and his blood which he shed for you.

Eat and drink in remembrance that he died for you,
and feed on him in your hearts
by faith with thanksgiving.

All We do not presume
to come to this your table, merciful Lord,
trusting in our own righteousness,
but in your manifold and great mercies.
We are not worthy
so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table.
But you are the same Lord
whose nature is always to have mercy.
Grant us therefore, gracious Lord,
so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ
and to drink his blood,
that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body
and our souls washed through his most precious blood,
and that we may evermore dwell in him,
and he in us.
Amen.

Communion is distributed.

Prayer after Communion

God our Redeemer,
whose Church was strengthened
by the blood of your martyr Polycarp:
so bind us, in life and death, to Christ's sacrifice
that our lives, broken and offered with his,
may carry his death and proclaim his resurrection in the world;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

All Amen

All Almighty God,
we thank you for feeding us
with the body and blood of your Son Jesus Christ.
Through him we offer you our souls and bodies
to be a living sacrifice.
Send us out in the power of your Spirit
to live and work
to your praise and glory.
Amen.