

And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' 33He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Hands up if you had to learn poetry when you were at school? I did – every other weekend I had to learn a poem and didn't get my Sunday lunch until I had done so, which meant that oftentimes I sat down to tuck into my rather dry roast beef and Yorkshire pudding at about 4 or 5 o'clock on a Sunday afternoon. I don't remember any of them – much to my regret actually, because I love poetry now. I used to think learning poetry by heart was nothing of the sort – it was just mechanical, learning by rote; what's the point when you can read it out of a book. But I've changed my mind. I do think learning things does enable them to seep into the heart and that in the heart we store a up a treasure house of memories that we draw from – and each time we do so it's both an old experience and a new one, for every time we revisit those memories they speak to us as a person who has moved on with new experiences of life to which our memories speak and which speak to our memories.

But when I was at school I didn't get it. We were once asked as our homework to find a poem and be prepared to read it and talk about it to the class. I chose Tennyson's 'Across the Bar' and duly read it out. 'Why did you like it' boomed our rather frightening teacher. Well, I said, I thought it was a nice, cheerful poem about setting sail from port and crossing the horizon. The teacher scoffed. 'Cheerful poem? It's about death, Moir.' Oh, I hadn't realised.

On Wednesday I was leading an 'Open Mind' session – we're doing five weeks of poetry and this week it was my friend Alfred Lord Tennyson again. I was introducing another of his poems, 'In Memoriam'. It's rather longer than 'Across the Bar' (16 lines) – runs to over 80pp.

But it's also about death. Written over 17 years it follows Tennyson's sense of bereavement following the loss of his best friend Arthur Hallam at the age of 22. But it also traces a deeply Christian mind and soul wrestling with doubt brought on by the scientific discoveries of the first half of the nineteenth century. There is a cycle to the poem, a three year cycle as in three places the calendar moves round to Christmas and the ringing out of the Christmas and new year bells. You may know the part where the bells are urged to:

Ring out the old, ring in the new,
Ring, happy bells, across the snow:
The year is going, let him go;
Ring out the false, ring in the true.

Each Christmas feels both the same and different. All the familiar things and rituals – the bells, the wreathed holly, the games (charades, blind man's buff), the gathering, the smell – year by year they are familiar, but the shadow of bereavement means they are different – there is a move from initial waves of turmoil and tears to – two years later – a less stormy melancholy. And each year feeds into the next as does the intervening time.

So it is in St John's gospel. The feasts is not Christmas, though, but Passover. The visits of Jesus to Jerusalem in John imply that the events take place over three years. In Matthew, Mark and Luke there is only one visit at the end and everything from Jesus's baptism to his Passion could happen within one year. They are hurriedly telling the story moving

inexorably to the end. John, written a little later and with time to stand back and write more reflectively, takes the long view and he invites us to do the same. Which is what we do. Each year we commemorate the Passion. Today, Passion Sunday, we turn our faces with Jesus towards Jerusalem; we prepare to walk with him into the city, to be with him in that journey of betrayal, denial, trial, rejection, suffering and agony. Each year we follow the same route, sing many of the same hymns, hear the same story, hold up the same wooden cross. Each year it's the same, but it's also different – because we have moved on, we have clocked up different experiences in our lives, we have faced new challenges, felt deeper sorrows and joys. And so we come the same people but a year older, because the treasure house of memory is fuller and richer – and this we bring to remembering the Passion at the same time as we bring the Passion to our memories; they speak to one another and we grow in faith and wisdom and Christlikeness.

Now this Good Friday you have a tough choice. If you want to aspire to fame and fortune head off to the Grafton Centre for I gather there from 9am in the morning to 6pm in the evening they will be auditioning for the X Factor. If however you aspire to wisdom and Christlikeness, well dare I suggest you might want to join us here or in church or Christian observances wherever you are.

And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.'

You might think that Jesus here is talking about his Ascension, but John makes clear that we need to focus on 52 days earlier.

33He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

So this is about his death, but what does he mean by 'the kind of death'? Perhaps this refers to the 'lifting up', the physical fact that Jesus's body was to be hauled up on to a cross on a hill and people would be looking up at it, at him. But perhaps he means also that this was the kind of death that would draw all people to him, the kind of death that made a hard-bitten, suffering-hardened Roman soldier see the way he died and proclaim that he must be God's son – and in that, the centurion was the first in a queue of millions upon millions who have been drawn to this sign, to this death, to this man.

And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.'

And so he has. Oh yes, our culture and society has grown weary and bored with him; there will no doubt be many more beating their path to glory at the Grafton Centre than walking behind a cross between the Methodist Church and St Andrew's. And I guess we in the church must take our share in the blame for that – it is our responsibility to lift up the cross in a way that draws people to the One borne by it. And we will do that more faithfully and effectively if we have taken the trouble to remember the Passion ourselves, week by week as we do this in remembrance of him and year by year as we celebrate the Easter feast.