CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

I speak today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

Several years ago, I was in London, England, and when I'm in London, England, there is one thing I'll always do. I'll always go to the Tate Modern Museum. It's my favorite museum in the whole world, and it's a place that has been a converted factory into an incredible gallery of modern art. And there was an exhibit on the Black Arts Movement, which is a movement of black artists from 1965 to 1975. And it was exquisitely curated. There were things there that you could not see anywhere else.

And as I made my way through the Black Arts Movement exhibit, I came upon one room in which the entire wall of the room hung this large canvas. That I have a copy of on your bulletin today. It was by Sam Gilliam. And this beautiful, expansive, abstract piece was entitled April 4th, and it was done in 1969. And I was struck by how powerful the piece was. It also was a piece that didn't quite fit the rest of the work that was being done during the Black Arts Movement. During the Black Arts Movement, the focus for many artists was on portraying black bodies and black faces, because these had been underrepresented in the canon of art.

But Gilliam was someone who worked in abstraction. And this piece was so powerful emotionally that I began to think about why it existed and what was its purpose. Gilliam did this piece to celebrate and remember, and to express the trauma that he experienced on April 4th, 1968, when Martin Luther King was assassinated. And the way he did this is he actually took different kinds of paint and different colors of paint, and he poured them on a canvas and then he folded the canvas and then unfolded it and let the paint dry, and then applied another color and another color, and then finally hung it up loose, unstretched on the wall.

Now this was, as I said, an exercise in abstract art. And we might be tempted to think of abstract art because of the name abstraction, as something that moves up, that looks at things from a less precise, less realistic level. But in fact, true abstraction is an invitation to move inside. True abstraction is an invitation to go deeper. And what Gilliam was doing in this piece was to try to express what it felt

like for him as an African American man to experience the trauma of King's assassination.

And by moving deeper into his own psychological experience, he actually created something that was somehow able to be more universal. Because there was no way you could experience this peace without entering in to the trauma that it depicted. And the trauma itself that was depicted was done in such an unusual way. He drew from John Coltrane's jazz, his sheets of music that Coltrane would do to create a kind of improvisational way of working. He drew upon that when he was doing the folding technique.

And he poured down black and he poured down red and he poured down purple. And all of this is a kind of reference to the trauma he's bearing witness to. He's pouring down the black and when you see it on the canvas, it looks a bit like you're seeing and looking for an image because that is what we do as human beings. We immediately look for patterns and images. And when I looked at it at first, it looked for all the world, like the faint outlines of the Shroud of Turin.

He uses purple because he wants to convey nobility. He wants to convey the power that the name King has, not just as a last name, but as a way to describe this leader in his life. He wanted to provide an image of the blood that King shed, which had been covered with almost alarming spectacle by the media after his assassination. He wanted to convey the blood and the gunshot and the sacrifice that King made. All of this was put out on this canvas. It was a diary, not only of his trauma, but also the trauma of a nation, the trauma that we had suffered a loss, that the beloved community, that great vision and social project, that had suddenly been attacked.

And I find this piece remarkable, not simply because it depicts trauma so powerfully, but because at every moment in the piece, you can see alongside it, transformation and transcendence. You see transcendence in that the choice of the red and the purple and the black give this peace to a kind of testimony to the love that is stronger than death. You see in it a kind of gesture for greater images of what it means to be self-sacrificial. It's hard not to see in this canvas a kind of figure of Christ. And you see in this powerful depiction, a kind of meditative working through trauma. You see that moment in which someone through folding as if through prayer, is somehow working through the shape of a wound.

What is trauma? Trauma is any event that hits you or wounds you that disrupts your identity, that makes you forget who you are. What is trauma? It's something that robs your story from you so you no longer can use the story that you have learned to somehow negotiate the way in which you are. What is trauma? Trauma is the loss of meaning, the loss of significance, the loss of purpose, the loss of hope. When we are experiencing trauma, what we are experiencing is a kind of

facing of a future without a script. Without knowing how to act or how to move forward, trauma devastates us.

And yet, the way through trauma is not so much to try to push it all away, but rather to somehow enter into it. To somehow find in the midst of it a new identity, a new narrative or story, a new script for the future. And what I can see in this incredible piece is just that. You see the identity of someone who is being shaped by the trauma that he or she is experiencing, and yet somehow invited into it. You see in that moment when you stand before this piece, a kind of community that you are surrounded by because if you or I can see that pain in that canvas, then there is a community that starts to be built around us. The artist is not alone when the artist paints the canvas. There is a kind of community built between the artist and the viewers. And the viewers come and they join the artist and in that shared trauma, there is a kind of healing. Because when we are surrounded by empathy, we suddenly have the capacity to heal. We find the capacity to tell a new story. We find the capacity to find a script that could begin to help us step by step into the future.

This piece is powerful to me, not only because next weekend we'll be celebrating our Easter vigil on April 4th, which is the date in which King was assassinated, but it's also powerful to me because it helps me see what really makes great art. What really makes great art is not the fact that there is just trauma that is depicted. It's not the fact that there is just transcendence depicted. What makes great art is that you see in that same piece, both a way in which we are all touched by trauma and at the same time an invitation to enter into transcendence. Great art somehow creates that kind of community. It somehow brings people together and invites them to name the wounds of their lives, but then to find resources for going forward.

And my model for that is not any movement in our history, it's actually my own beliefs as a Christian, because what I believe that Jesus does that is the greatest work of art in the world, is that Jesus answers trauma not by coming and pushing it away, not by coming and saying it did not matter or no longer exists. Jesus does not come to us to use the philosophical terms as a kind of deliverance from on high of something that is unchanging. Jesus is not a deus ex machina. Jesus comes to us as a God who comes to us in an act of self emptying. Jesus comes to us in an outpouring of love. Jesus enters into the human experience, which means He enters into trauma and transforms it.

We see that today in our reading from Philippians. “Let this same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness and being found in human form, he

humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on the cross.”

Jesus is the kenotic outpouring of God's love, embodied and personified in all of who He is. It comes to the front, when He comes to His death, when He dies, so that we may live. Jesus is the answer to our trauma. Jesus is the perfect reconciliation of our trauma and our transcendence. You and I, when we celebrate Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday, when we move through Holy Week, you and I are invited on a similar journey in a similar encounter. We are invited to name our trauma. We're invited to actually see our life of faith through the things that break our hearts, and break our souls, and break our bodies.

There is no other way in which we can be a Christian. We cannot simply allow this liturgy to surround us, but not touch us. We cannot allow the readings we do to be simply a map that we can follow for finding meaning. We ourselves have to find ourselves in the midst of what is happening. We have to feel our trauma and find the transcendence that comes through Jesus. That is the work of this week. That is the work of all of the services that we'll be doing this Holy Week, which I encourage you all to come to. This is the work we do together because when it comes to things like trauma, the only way out is the way through, and the only way through is together. And Jesus is the promise to us that He has experienced trauma to the full.

We see that today in our reading from Matthew. The best way to summarize this long, securitas, weird, wonderful, awful, traumatic, tragic, triumphant way in which Jesus walks to the cross is by seeing this as a kind of layering of both trauma and transcendence. We see trauma at every step: when Jesus has His identity attacked, when Jesus has His narrative stolen from Him, when Jesus is told that He is a sham, when Jesus is mocked, when Jesus is made fun of for being supposedly the King of the Jews and supposedly the Son of God, and supposedly the Messiah, this Jesus who is flogged, this Jesus who is spat on, this Jesus who is completely ashamed.

Jesus says nothing in these moments, but instead enters fully into the trauma that He is surrounded by and that is coming to Him. And He says words that are the most human words possible, that all of us who are people of faith, say at some point when we experience trauma. He says, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Jesus knows the trauma of human experience. Jesus might have entered the canvas that Gilliam painted with complete authenticity. He knows all of that trauma face to face. It was His trauma that He spoke, and because it was His trauma fully, it was our trauma too.

So you find in this passage an incredible testimony to trauma, and you have in this passage at the same time, an incredible invitation to transcendence. Because at

every moment, in the most ironic ways, the whole text reminds us of who Jesus is, delivered even by His accusers, even by His disciples that desert him, Jesus is the King. Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is the Son of God. Even that, the Son of God is given in the final breath by not a disciple or a Jew, but by a centurion, a representative of the empire who says, “Surely this man was the son of God.” There is, in other words, transcendence in this piece. And with that transcendence comes resurrection because there is a ripping apart of the veil of the temple. There is an earthquake and the dead become alive at the end of the text.

This gospel for today is perhaps the model of a great work of art. You see in it trauma and you see in it transcendence and you see the two at the same time. And that is the work that we must do. Holy Week cannot be yours if you are not willing to enter into it not only from the neck up, but from the neck down. By seeing yourselves in that procession, by walking with us together in this work.

This is what we do today. We invite each other to engage in a kind of work together of processing around. We did that as a bit of a liturgical move today, but it actually speaks for what we do as a church. And I have been part of churches where we actually did process around with our palms. My first Palm Sunday happened in 1988. I'd never been to one before. And I had come to believe in Jesus, in part because of the evangelical movement, for which I remain completely grateful because it was through that movement that I came to claim Jesus as my personal savior, but was in the church, the Episcopal church, that I found my way into what it means to actually be Christians together.

And it happened because on Palm Sunday I had made a decision that I loved this person named Claire Dober. And I went to see her and her parents were there, and her father asked me what my intentions were with my life. And I decided that I would give a good answer. I said, well, my job is to spend as much time with your daughter as possible. That's my ambition. And he who had achieved everything said, good answer.

But we went to church, and it turns out Claire went to this hippie church in Cambridge, Massachusetts named St. Peter's. It was full of an incredibly motley assortment of people. When I say hippie church, I mean hippie church. Like there were a lot of people in Birkenstocks in the middle of the winter with wool socks on, which is the stupidest thing you could ever do. And they assured me that that was more comfortable. Fools. And we were to process. The rector wanted them to process not just around the inside of the church, but to go around the city block to proclaim Jesus as Lord.

And there was a nor'easter outside. I'm not making this up. There was like the worst weather I'd ever seen, and I'm from New England. I've seen worse weather than this. And it was raining and snowing and the wind was blowing, and

everybody got their palms ready and they got their candles lit and they opened the door and immediately the wind just did this to our palms and the candles went out.

And these well-meaning kind of hippie people just kept going. And we went around the block and we were soaked. And we came back to the church and we had the rest of the service. And it was there that I saw a community that was willing to embody its faith. The rector said at the beginning of the procession, “Let us proceed in peace,” and they said, “In the name of Christ, amen.” You and I have that invitation before us this Holy Week. Let us proceed in peace.

In the name of Christ. Amen.