

Good Friday 9.4.04

St George's, Pearce.

Let us pray:

May your Spirit work in us, that we may understand better your goodness and your love.

Amen

We come to that paradoxical time in the church's year where the day that Jesus died is called 'Good' Friday. It is a task for each of us to wrestle the 'good' out of the sorrow, humiliation, suffering, and death of Jesus of Nazareth.

Sometimes we take comfort in feeling that he was a good man in his life – that is where the good is – and that his death is a tragic end of this life. But not everyone would agree even with that. If everyone saw him as good, why did he have enemies and why was he crucified? For some, Jesus was a blasphemer and a rebel, and he was rightly put to death to keep order, to keep the law as they had received it from God. After all, he was leading people astray. The mockers in today's reading from Mark make this view clear.

Who was right? Which version was good? We are confronted with these questions all through the gospel accounts of Jesus' life and death. The gospels draw us into an argument around God: what is God like, what is good and what does God require of us? It is the same argument that the prophets before him had had. Remember the prophet Micah?

He has shown you what is good. And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)

Jesus provoked the question of goodness and justice, not by academic arguments but by his practice, by the way he lived. When Jesus healed on the Sabbath, when he did not wash his hands before dinner at the Pharisee's house, when he cleansed the temple, in all these cases he was provoking the argument himself. For him, goodness meant compassion in the moment, even if that meant breaking the religious laws. Goodness was a matter of the heart rather than outward rules and regulations. Faith requires a humble walk with God, rather than trusting in the praise and honour from others. All these things set Jesus at times in conflict with the orthodoxy and practice of his day, and remain as a challenge to us today.

Yet none of it quite explains why his suffering and death can be called 'good'. Where is the good in 'Good Friday'? What is the *theology*, the understanding of God, that redeems this otherwise tragic event? I know that some traditional theologies see Good Friday as Jesus dying for us, in our stead, for we all deserved to die. But this leaves us with a God who has violence in God's heart. How can God be good and loving, yet require a bloody, agonising death? It also leaves human violence in place, unredeemed and undisclosed. Is there another way that this day, Good Friday, is good news for us?

I have found some clues in St Augustine (*The Trinity* XIII.4.17). Augustine saw Jesus' death basically as a ransom. God was buying us back from being in thrall to the powers of Satan, the anti-God forces of the world. God did not try to beat these powers in a power game, but rather met them in a justice game. God gave to the powers of this world an innocent man, and they killed him. For Augustine, this first shows us that such powers are morally corrupt. We are enabled, then, to be released from their grip. It is like the disillusionment we experience when someone we had admired and looked up to, more than

that, had been enthralled by, has been found to be immoral in some way, and we lose the grip they had on us. We become free of the power they had over us.

Second, it reveals to us what God is like. In emptying himself to become one of us, God is shown in humility and love. The power that God exercises comes from these first. It is the power of goodness, which has no violence in it. Augustine contrasts this with the alternative - those who lust after power for its own sake first, and are only concerned with justice and love secondarily. In its extreme such a way is demonic and will stop at nothing, sacrificing others for its own sake. These are two incompatible ways of being. How can you love and desire blood?

Discerning what is God-like power is the issue. I am helped here by Paul's discernment of the difference between knowledge and love in 1 Corinthians 8:1. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Love edifies a group, whereas knowledge puffs up some at the expense of others. God-like power, the power of love, builds up community, cares for all, particularly the weak and vulnerable.

Let me illustrate my point another way. If you were asked to discern whether a particular group or community exercised power in a loving manner, how would you judge that? One way may be to become part of that group for a while, submit yourself to it and see if you feel edified, respected, built up. That is one way, but it is not enough. Some systems of power are selective and biased, like South Africa under Apartheid. They build up some members of the group at the expense of others. So how could you discern the power of a group? By looking at its victims, those who are excluded, marginalised, rendered no-bodies, devalued, hated, expelled, killed. Then you would find out how a particular community exercised its power. Then you would see whether goodness prevailed, or whether order was maintained on the backs of victims.

By journeying to Jerusalem, Jesus was submitting to the powers at the heart of his religion and empire. The gospel of Mark tells us the results very succinctly. 'And they crucified him'. This was Jesus' ultimate act in disclosing the moral bankruptcy of violence. But it was the culmination of his practice throughout his ministry. He had sided with the victims, the most vulnerable, the no-bodies, the 'least of these'.

How is this 'good news'? Do we have a weak God who will get killed again and again? If we only had Good Friday and not Easter Day, the answer may be 'yes'. Rather God is shown there to be one who is unkillable, who is life itself...but I am jumping the gun. We will hear more about that on Easter Morn. What we do have here, on the Friday of Easter, is a new understanding of God. The readings for today trace this change.

In the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, God requires it. It is a test of Abraham's faith. How far will he go to do God's will? Does it not demonstrate Abraham's faith and love of God that he would do what is required of him, even this? Although Isaac is spared, and God has shown mercy, God remains one who may arbitrarily ask for the sacrifice of a child. Or perhaps the doubt is starting to creep in here, that God was teaching Abraham that God does not require child sacrifice, as Abraham had thought.

The second reading from Psalm 40 has shifted greatly in its theology. Verse 6 says: Sacrifice and offering you do not desire...burnt offering and sin offering you have not

desired'. The Psalmist contrasts these outward religious practices with what God does desire: the law written on our hearts, our inward disposition delighting in God.

Then we come to the New Testament, and to what we have said about Jesus so far in his disclosure of God's love and compassion compared with human violence. I find it easier to get to the heart of this from the gospel of Luke. There, Jesus twice laments over Jerusalem on his journey there. The first time is when he set his face toward Jerusalem. Just the mention of it sets him off:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you would not. (Luke 13: 34-5)

The second time is on his journey when he catches sight of Jerusalem in the distance. He stops in his tracks and breaks down and cries. I find this profoundly moving. He loved this city and all that it stood for in the history of God and God's people. He wept over it saying,

If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace. (Luke 19: 41-44)

He goes on to lament Jerusalem's fate, because it did not recognize the time of its visitation from God.

Here we have the great irony of Jesus' death. The Jerusalem establishment put him to death under the law. They are protecting God's law, given to Moses. They put to death the very God they were protecting. They did not recognize the time of their visitation from God.

I began by saying that the gospels draw us into an argument about God, what God is like and what does God require of us? The new understanding of God given us in Good Friday is barely recognisable as the one who asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. It is not that this God has now sacrificed his own son instead, it is rather that 'sacrifice and offering [God] does not require' (Ps. 40:6). God's visitation was as a *victim of human sacrifices and violence*, in order to undo the system from the inside. God's desire was not for violence but was rather a mother hen's love. It was for the things that make for peace. It makes all the difference in the world that God is love and in God there is no darkness, no violence and vengeance, and that God in Jesus sided with the victims of human power gone wrong.

Good Friday reveals to us the heart of God, the lengths God will go to in order to bring us back on track and to win us over again to goodness. When I think of goodness today I think of something fragile and vulnerable, like a new born baby that needs nurture and protection.

In the crucifixion story we are faced with the choice of recognizing the dying, humiliated Jesus as God, or seeing him through the eyes of the mockers. It would have been difficult at the time to know which way to choose. We look back now from other horizons and see a vindication of Jesus's way of being in the world, even if it was costly. I am only beginning to realise that when you glimpse the heart of God you also feel the great sorrow that Jesus felt lamenting over Jerusalem. But that is more authentic, and more inspiring (since it is derived from love) than not feeling anything at all, or worse, feeling hatred. They seem to go together, love and sorrow.

We come back to the question, what is good about Good Friday? I would like to sum this up by referring to the two cartoons in your service sheets. One represents the mockers. It is some graffiti from first century Rome. It is mocking a boy Alexamenos worshipping his God, that is, the crucified Jesus. Jesus is given an ass's head. Only a fool would worship and ass of a god. The other cartoon is by Michael Leunig representing the view of faith, that this dying Jesus is the Christ of God. I was struck by the difference between them, not just that one is from a faith stance and the other is anti. It is how this difference is portrayed. Notice how the cartoon about Alexamenos has no horizons in it. There are no other lines putting this event in a larger context. What you see is what you get. There is no concession that there may be meaning outside this particular picture. Jesus remains an ass.

In contrast, I have heard Leunig say that he always draws horizons. His depiction of Good Friday has the cross on a hill with a bird on top of the cross, situating this event in the larger horizon of the earth, of creation, and of God's redeeming what has been lost. The moon is in the sky, putting the earth in the heavens, with their rhythms of day and night, time and history. And significantly, the angel situates this picture in the realm of God and God's activities on earth. No matter how tragic or foolish this death may seem, God is at work in ways that have yet to be disclosed. But more of that on Sunday morning.

It is only in within these larger horizons that we may see the good in Good Friday, see it as part of a larger story of the revelation of God to us. We are invited on this day to contemplate this death and to see in it the work of God with a mother-hen love for the world.

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8.4.04

Reference book: James Alison, *Raising Abel*, Crossroads, New York, 1996.