

Good Friday
6/4/2007

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Psalm 22

Hebrews 4:14-16, 5:7-9

John 18:1-19:42

The Cross: choosing not to live by evil means

The whole of John's Gospel is like a trial scene about the truth embodied in Jesus Christ, which reaches its crucial point today. The trial has inspired this custom of gathering to reflect upon an ugly death, and to venerate the Cross, the savage means by which that death came about. It is difficult not to be moved by the innocence of the victim, to be outraged by the vehemence of those arrayed against him, and appalled at the hopeless, bungling of Pilate who, in breach of his own conscience colluded in the immoral and illegal murder of an innocent man.

The cause seems to be that Jesus attempted to demonstrate the otherness of Abraham's God by embodying it in his life. This aroused hatred and resentment from all sections because it challenged the way life was being lived. In return they used all the powers of death against him: coercion, intimidation, politicking and brute force. But he did not allow fear of hatred, violence and death to conquer him. Their power was finally no power at all. Since then many have been raised up to live in his way - in a Spirit of self-giving love.

Everything we hear in the Passion shows that the drama of salvation unfolds in a world saturated with savagery, overt and hidden. In Jesus the merciful love of God collided with a world in which the desire to dominate and humiliate incited violence and counter-violence - characteristics alive and well today. What this says about our world is disturbing and while we are not all equally to blame for the darkness and death that envelops us, we are nevertheless caught up in its web. We can think about Pilate, Caiaphas and the others, Judas, Peter, the disciples who fled, the crowds - egged on by a threatened religious leadership. But there is some way in which we all participate in this death **because at some point our lives too are lived in opposition to the God Jesus tried to show us**. The hard part about Good Friday is that it exposes us to ourselves. It tells us how hard it is for humans to choose something other than the world's preferred way of operating. The cross reminds us that those who say yes to Jesus commit to a stubborn trust that humanity can do its business in other ways, as reflected in the life and death of this man. But we must recognise that this approach is a threat to the self-indulgent ways of the world. It will provoke resistance, betrayal and the worst kind of power play.

But if the Cross reveals us to ourselves it also reveals God to us. That God is to be found in this place of torture, suffering and death is a scandal to the idealists and the philosophers, and it does not fulfil the hopes of those who want real worldly power. The mystery of the Cross, and the paradox of faith, is that here God hides under the appearance of the opposite. God is found, not in the place of grandeur and strength, but in the place of suffering and weakness. This seems alien to what we think of God as being. But the real work and presence of God is arrived at only by God going out from

himself to become not God – that is, one of us - in order to show that true strength is the strength to choose weakness, humiliation and suffering. We are saved by this knowledge because it opens up a new possibility of life.

The life and death of Jesus which reveals God and God's verdict on our violent world is a gift. In this we see God's own costly love which comes in search of us to mediate friendship and forgiveness in the hardest place. In the Creed it says that after the Cross Jesus descended into Hell. The Cross itself was hellish, but Hell is beyond that. We may not share this worldview exactly, but the meaning is there is no restriction in the range of God's love for the world.

The great truth embodied in Jesus is that the power of God is merciful, suffering love **that refuses to live by evil means**. This is good news for a world where many dark shadows fall. It means there is another way of doing business here, one that is based on life, not death. That is why those who choose the Cross speak of hope, freedom, and reconciliation even in the toughest of places. This is good news, not just for us, but for all people, and ultimately the whole created world.