

Pentecost 7
3/7/2016

Mark the Evangelist

Galatians 2:15-21

Psalm 30

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Why did Jesus die?

Why did Jesus die?

The mundane answers to that question involve the ways in which Jesus came into conflict with religious and political authorities: he rubs people up the wrong way. The children's "Important God Thought #3" – that God sometimes gets in the way – is very much what we see in the person of Jesus. He is a great disturbance to the religious authorities and, behind them, there are hints that the broader political opposition is also going to be great.

And so, just like countless thousands – perhaps millions – of other martyrs, Jesus is crushed by the machinery of synagogue or church or mosque, or the political or economic system.

While it is a very natural thing for this kind of account to occur to us in our time, it is not the way the New Testament thinks about the death of Jesus. And so this morning we heard from St Paul of the "Christ who loved me and gave himself for me". This is a very different account of the "why" of Jesus' death. Unlike the institutional murder of being crushed by the synagogue or by Rome, here we have an *intentional* death on Jesus' part: "loved me and *gave himself* for me...".

This way of talking about the death of Jesus invokes the difficult category of *sacrifice*: Jesus "giving himself up" for me. The modern western mind, and not least the modern Christian mind, has a lot of trouble with the idea of sacrifice. Again at the mundane level, we are pretty squeamish these days when it comes to blood. Most of us would probably be vegetarians if we had to get our own meat from the farm to our tables, rather than buy it already styrofoamed and cling-wrapped. Blood is just not part of our everyday experience, and we are uncomfortable with it.

But there are some deeper objections to the notion of sacrifice as it is used theologically; in particular: the idea that God *demand*s the shedding of blood – particularly the shedding of the blood of one named as God's own Son. What kind of god is it that requires this kind of exchange to take place? We will even hear from time to time objections about the implied "divine child abuse". The objection is a natural one, and it is a serious objection.

But the more profound objection, so far as Paul would be concerned, is that this understanding of sacrifice implies a kind of economy outside of us and outside of God which ties everybody's hands – that somehow even God cannot move until blood is spilt. That is the most serious problem with the notion of sacrifice, whether the sacrifice of a son, or a lamb or even a dove.

The idea of sacrifice is there in the Old Testament because that is how people operated at the time. The children's Important God Thought #4 is that "God is always somewhere". For the Hebrews the Somewhere was a context in which sacrifice was used as a means of speaking about how we relate to God. And so it is as if God adopts

that and refines it, turning *from* a means of exchange by which gods might be satisfied into a *sacrament*. It now *looks like* a buying of life from God, but the ritual of sacrifice is now given to us as a sign of what is involved in reconciliation – that *God* is doing the giving.

Paul takes up the Old Testament imagery of sacrifice when he talks about the Christ who gave himself up for me. But he is not saying that You understand about sacrifice, and sacrifice is about an exchange, and that explains Jesus.

It works the other way: that Jesus gives the full and proper meaning to how sacrifice works. There is nothing that ties God's hands. There is not a Deep Magic which must be performed in order for God to act in love towards God's people.

And so God is not looking for Jesus' blood. Jesus' blood is not a currency for salvation which changes hands.

Jesus is simple gift. He doesn't give himself *because* that will affect something else in the way that we give money to get something else. His is not an "economic" sacrifice. What we have here is a sheer giving. Jesus' *whole being* is giving. He is, as a previous generation spoke of it, the One for Others. That is the heart of what he is. So there is no economy operating here. That is why Paul says that circumcision, in the way it is insisted upon by the Judaizers, is not an item of on list of things you have to pay God in order for God to accept you.

The cross, then, doesn't *cause* something to happen. It is a totally different kind of economy. Jesus doesn't come *in order to* die. Jesus comes to live. It just happens that living in that different economy – that gift-economy – in which you know yourself as fundamentally belonging to God and not as having to acquire or prove that belonging – is potentially to come into conflict with those who require that we establish or prove, ourselves, that we get the religion right, or the politics right, or the economics right.

Jesus died because he lived in that way that he did. He lived knowing that his fundamental being comes from the one who loved him and sent him. And so he denies things which limit that fundamental being. This gets him killed.

This is not easy to get our head around. As I said last week, our lives are very much about acquisition, about trading and growing. But Paul says "I have died to all of that". It has all been crucified to me, and I have been crucified to it. Now I seek to live out of what it that Jesus himself has. And we'll see a little later in the book how Paul uses the nothing notion of adoption: Jesus is the Son, and I become "son-ified" (so we might translate the Greek) – I become one who exists in the same kind of way that he did, existing not with a view to *acquiring* God's love but *out of* that love.

This is the fundamental word of the gospel: that God's love comes to us before anything else. (This is our justification for baptising little children who can't yet Yes or No: God loves us before we can love). And our call is simply to live out of that gift: to stand before each other already justified by God, not demanding of one another but living a life of gift.

I died to those other things. It is no longer I who lives but Christ who lives in me.

By the grace of God, may we ever more fully grow into this gift, and take on its form as our own.

(Slightly edited transcript from recording)