

Isaiah 52:13-15
John 18:33-19:16

Good Friday and the End of Tragedy

In a sentence:

More than life after death, the gift of God is life before death: life which knows the tragic but overcomes it

So long ago

Good Friday – *the* Good Friday – seems now to be ‘so long ago.’ Why, of all the places we might turn to in this modern age for reflection or insight, should we turn to this place?

This question is not just a matter of time. A few years ago, the broadcaster SBS had a line in its advertisements, “Six billion stories, and counting”, later updated to “Seven billion”, and we’re now at eight billion. Considering on top of this the 100 billion or so other human beings who have lived, the narrowing of our interest to one dismal Friday two thousand years is the strangest of things.

Of all the endings of all the lives in all of history, why consider just this one?

Good Friday is only interesting if Jesus himself is interesting, and a certain kind of interesting. He is arrested and executed because the authorities find him interesting in problematic ways. To these, Jesus’ crucifixion was the death of an enemy. He was interesting to the crowds and the disciples in a different way. For these, his death was the death of a friend or a hope. These experiences are familiar and play out daily in nursing homes, on country roads and in Ukraine’s smashed villages and towns. As the story unfolds, this is ‘all’ Jesus is to those around him, and Good Friday is just plain tragic in the way human life can be.

Who are you?

‘Are you a king?’ asks Pilate of the accused Jesus, standing before him. ‘Where have you come from?’ That is, ‘*Who* are you?’ Pilate can only understand these questions on his own terms – are you a king like Herod or the Emperor? This is fair enough, but any answer on these terms is almost irrelevant to why Jesus’ death might matter. Kings and emperors also die. At this point in the story, the end of Jesus is like the end of the rest of us: a lament, a death notice, a newspaper obituary. This is simple tragedy if, in Jesus’ case, tragedy in one of its nastier realisations.

Easter and the tragedy of tragedies

It is sometimes said on Good Friday that we shouldn’t jump too quickly to Easter, skipping over the pain and suffering of the day to what seems to be the happy ending. But we can’t keep Easter out of the picture here because Easter shifts the story beyond mere tragedy. Easter doesn’t ‘undo’ Good Friday, but it answers Pilate’s question, now on God’s own terms; Easter reveals the *identity* of *this* crucified one.

If Easter tells us anything which matters, it tells us *who* died, and we focus on this death among all deaths today because of this identification. And this is because Easter reveals that the bad news of Good Friday is worse than we first imagined. The bad news is not merely that tragedy continues to unfold, but that good people have crucified the ‘king’,

the 'son of God', the 'messiah', the 'lord of glory'. The bad news is that this tragedy is the tragedy of all tragedies. It doesn't get any worse than this.

The God who does not look away

Easter, then, does not exceed or cancel Good Friday but points back to the cross as the true load-bearing event. The weight of Easter is here: today, Friday.

And what is that weight?

At the risk of wandering into the realm of exaggeration – but only just so – Easter faith is the conviction that the God of all things died on Good Friday. To believe in the resurrection of Jesus is to believe this: that this death, among all deaths, is the one which matters. For, here, *God* dies and *all the world* with him.

This is, of course, impossible (or, at least, without a good *trinitarian* theology, which might make it sustainable). To say '*God* died' feels like an over-reach which is very difficult to allow. The mere *saying* of it can only be mystifying (which doesn't hurt, from time to time). But we can wonder what would be the case if it were true, and what light such speculation might see.

If this is the death that matters among all deaths – the tragedy of all tragedies – *and yet Easter follows*, then we can say that on Good Friday God sees us. God *sees* us, *becomes* us, *feels* us in all our tragedy.

And, on the strength of the peace declared in the risen Jesus, we can also say that God, having seen us, did not look away.

God sees us and does not look away. God sees that we are tragic and does not look away. God sees *you* and does not look away. To look away would be to cringe before tragedy, finding it too much to bear, and so refusing to see or hear.

We know tragedy. We have been and caused tragedy, and we know the ease of looking away.

But God sees and doesn't look away. And it is this sustained gaze which brings life. God's gaze denies the tragic – not denying the suffering but denying its final power.

God looks, to deny that the last word will be death.

God refuses to turn away from seeing the deep and the void of the worldly inevitability of crucifixions and firing squads and genocides, of abuse and neglect and exploitation.

God sees, and this is the beginning of the end of tragedy because, from the perspective of Easter, we begin to see with God's eyes.

Tragedy's deathly grip weakens for us when resurrection's light reveals our part in the dark and broken world and we can see, and repent, and become ourselves a new beginning to the end of tragedy.

'Who are you?', Pilate asks, and we ask with him, suspecting that the tragic is all there is to know. We have to listen for a night, and a day, and a night to hear Jesus' answer:

'I am the death of death, and hell's destruction.

Open your eyes, and live'.
