

Good Friday
21/03/2008

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12

Psalm 22

Hebrews 4:14 – 16, 5:7 - 9

John 18:1 – 19:42

... a man discarded...

William Golding's book *Lord of the Flies* is a story of a group of boys who, as the result of an air crash, become castaways on an island. The boys find enough food to eat, but working out how to live together is the greater challenge. There are leadership struggles and factions develop.

During an exploration of a remote part of the Island a few of the boys become aware of a strange shape that billows and moves in unpredictable ways. They form the view that evil forces are at work on the Island. Later, one boy, Simon breaks away from the group to investigate. In his absence the others join in a ritual dance intended to placate the evil forces.

Simon discovers the ballooning object is the parachute belonging to a pilot who had become caught in a tree and died. Simon returns to the group and breaks into the ritual dance to tell the others there is nothing to fear. In a crazed frenzy they turn on him and kill him. They did not want their myths about themselves challenged, or the realities of life beyond their circle debunked. They did not want to turn their world around. And so the truth teller died, discarded and demonised as an enemy.

Good Friday is about how God took the risk of entering into the realms of our darkest fears so that we might learn to live by another truth. And Good Friday powerfully demonstrates how humanity responded to God's attempt to turn life in the world around. On Good Friday we see what God is like, and we see what we are like too.

From the outset John's Gospel challenges us to decide for or against Jesus. What does Jesus bring? The freedom and mercy of God at work amongst us, in which there is no trace of self-interest or self-defence. In John Jesus demonstrates this repeatedly. He brings the joy of good wine to a wedding where there was none; living water – the refreshment of faith to an outcast and demeaned Samaritan woman; sight, and the insight of faith, to a man born blind and ostracised as a sinner; bread to hungry people who had none; and life to Lazarus who had died. But instead of being celebrated for these and many other gifts of merciful love, at every point antagonism to him built until it reached the climax we heard today. It is difficult to fathom the relationship between the innocence of the victim and the vehemence of those arrayed against him. But the new possibilities of life he stood for were too great a challenge. Jesus was an unsafe person, and so they put him to death.

But even as he endured the powers of hell he demonstrated he did not live by the same defensive codes that held them. He did not allow fear of violence and death to conquer him and, faced with his steadfast trust in God, their power was finally no

power at all.

The cross uncovers the extent to which humankind functions on a foundation of life denying choices. We resist the mercy Jesus brings because we are determined to have God on our own terms.

The cross exposes what we are like. And it reveals God to us, but not in a way that is obvious. The paradox of Christian faith is that God endures the worst about us in order to show that true strength chooses to embrace the boundaries we normally abhor: weakness, humiliation, ostracism, suffering and death. This may seem an alien view of God – but it is good news for all who suffer or find themselves trapped and oppressed on the bottom end of the scale. That is why the cross saves us from ourselves. It opens up the possibility of encountering the divine freedom in the most unexpected place. Even the place of terror does not lie outside the sovereignty of Christ who shows us that those who live in God live. Paradoxically this shows us there is something to fear: losing the God who loved us to this extent.

The new possibilities that emerge as a result of the Cross of Christ mean there is more to this than hope for individuals. There is scope for developing a new approach to life in community. It was Tertullian (160 – 225), a theologian who had his faults, who saw that the Gospel was a call to a new world. He found in the Gospel, the seed for a whole new approach to life, a commitment to a belief that humanity can do its business in ways other than those we know so well. Imagine new possibilities for life in Iraq, in Gaza, in Africa, in Tibet, and in the financial markets of the world.

Good Friday places a choice before us. Will we recognize the merciful love that is given to us here, and choose to live in that way, no matter what it costs? Will we recommit to travel with this man discarded, for the sake of the life that was in him, and which he gave for us, and all people?

To live according to the cross involves always being open to the limits of our own knowledge and power. It means always being open to the otherness that challenges the place we have come to rest and calls us forward into new, and possibly uncomfortable transformations. It means being truly open to the other even at cost to ourselves.

Such a life is one in which there will be trials. Not because God is punitive and wants us to suffer. But because all who commit to the notion that humanity can do its business according to Jesus' ways will, of necessity, join God in the controversy God has with the way the world runs.

Living by the cross will involve struggle. But in this struggle there is life.