

**Good Friday**  
**25/3/2016**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Isaiah 52:13-53:6**

**Psalm 22**

**John 19:1-16**

### **Breaking Bad on Good Friday**

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Walter White is a chemist, a very, very good chemist – a could-have-won-a-noble-prize chemist. Walter is the central character in the TV series “Breaking Bad”, which wound up a few years ago. “Breaking Bad” is a phrase from America’s south, having to do with raising hell, or bucking authority.

What makes Walter interesting for our purposes today is that he is diagnosed with a serious cancer. It’s America, and medical treatment is prohibitively expensive. And so Walter begins to make methamphetamines – the drug “ice” – to meet his medical costs. Being a very, very good chemist, Walter makes very, very good ice, which makes him both valuable and dangerous, and the five seasons of the series track the effect of that value and the extent and impact of the danger he comes to present.

Perhaps predictably, the whole story is an unfolding tragedy. Walter can’t tell anybody he is an ice cook – other than those he is producing it for. Lies, deception, misdirection and misinformation are his day to day routine. A lot of people die including, in the end, people Walter loves and cares for, and not a little of Walter himself dies along the way.

While there is no particular moral judgement of Walter expressed in the telling of the story, it is an implied moral tale; it could only end in tears, and it does. And so the series can be seen as a study in the almost necessary escalation of deceit and violence, once one begins down the slippery slope of a life of crime.

But my interest today is not in Walter’s story as a moral tale. You don’t need a preacher to tell you that it is a bad thing to profit from the misery which a drug like ice wreaks in the community. If that isn’t already obvious, we have politicians and police commissioners to make it clear enough.

In fact, for the most part, you don’t need a preacher to tell you very much at all about morals. What we like to imagine are “Christian values” are, in our society at least, generally the values held by the political party of one’s personal choice, the particular colour of which is the colour of the filter through which we read the Scriptures and church tradition and determine how we – but especially how *others* – should act.

So what *can* a preacher say helpfully about Walter and his tragedy, which might not be heard many other places?

The *moral* evaluation of Walter’s action is that he is “scum” – something which even people close to him come to say. He chose to do this and he ought not to have so chosen. This is what we might call an “external” judgement. It is relatively clear about what is good and what is not, and Walter’s choices were not. We generally “get” this. Such evaluations are straightforward and we are familiar enough with them, whether we’re judging others or, sometimes, even ourselves.

From Walter’s point of view, however, this is not how it looks. What is most interesting – morally – about Walter’s story is not what he does but how he *accounts to himself* for what he does. Although he does many bad things, one of the refrains which we continue

to hear is, “It had to be done”. Yes, it is dreadful, but it *had* to be done. When Walter says this, you get the strong impression that he declares it as much to himself as he does to any associate for whom he feels he needs to justify what has happened. He himself needs to be assured that it “had to be done”.

*Why?*

Because the expression, “It had to be done,” absolves what, on the surface, looks like a moral failure. If something “has” to be done, there is no option. And when there is no option, we are freed from moral accountability. Whether an opposition drug baron, or a little boy who stumbles across their operation, or a partner who has been loved but now becomes a dangerous liability, the choice for death “had to” be made.

The “had to be done” in Walter’s particular story refers to the need for self-preservation. Walter’s first “cook” of the drugs takes place in order to be able to pay the enormous medical costs for the treatment of his cancer. And he has nothing to leave his family but his funeral costs. This first cook leads quickly to the first few murders – or, perhaps, only they are only “killings”, without the moral loading of “murder”, as they are also matters of self-preservation.

But the crucial thing is not *what* is done, or even the particular – perhaps good – outcome which is sought. The crucial thing is the appeal which links these two things. That link is *necessity*.

It is *necessary* that it happen in this way. Our hands are tied. I wish it could have been different. If I had not, then... And so there I had no option. I could not have done otherwise.

*We have a law, and according to that law it is necessary that Jesus die.* Our hands are tied. It is necessary, Pilate, that you do this, else you prove yourself to be an enemy of the Emperor. Your hands are tied.

We might lament the sheer tragedy of Good Friday. But in the passion narratives people are not just doing bad things, or even just being badly mistaken about what needs to be done, with Jesus, like every other unfortunate victim, being collateral damage along the way. Just like Walter’s choices, the call for crucifixion makes sense – a kind of sense. It is the same kind of sense we appeal to when it is necessary to do or say something other than what might normally be expected of us. People are not unfaithful to spouses because they simply want more sex or even just companionship; they make their wife or husband the *reason* they are unfaithful. If things were better at home, this wouldn’t have happened; I “*need*” to do this. Nations do not lock up refugees in faraway places because they are inherently mean-spirited or immoral. It is “*necessary*” to do this else the flood gates will open (or, in the more humanitarian but also more disingenuous version: there’ll be more deaths at sea). I do not betray myself by breaking a commitment to a diet or to study or to faith; I make a case as to why it is necessary to do so, and *then* I give up. I do not blow up fellow citizens because I am bad; they are wrong, and so deserve it: it is, in this sense, a rational thing to do.

And so it turns out that, as shocking as the effects of sin might be, sin itself is rather a mundane thing. Its ordinariness is in that it finds justification. It fits in, seeks precisely *not* to be the wrong thing – perhaps only to have been once hidden as an option, but now discovered, to our relief. Sin hides in necessity.

Necessity not only ties our hands; it predetermines things. It reduces our being in the world to a kind of moral science analogous to the if-then of physical science: under these conditions, this will happen. The precise science which makes possible Walter's perfection of the production of ice is reflected in a moral science by which death is not only dealt out, but is *justified* as necessary. Just as aluminium needs to be added to mercury chloride to produce a mercury aluminium amalgam which makes possible a reductive amination (or something like that!) – just as you have to do that as a step towards producing a pure methamphetamine, so too anyone who threatens my family must be eliminated. “We have a law, and according to that law, he must die”.

What might a preacher say about Walter White and his decisions, which mere morality might not think to say?

Perhaps this: that moral, social, political necessity stands as a marker of potential sin on the scale of the crucifixion of Jesus. Some things, of course, might well be necessary, but perhaps not as many moral, or social, or political things as we might imagine.

And this ought to make us wary of any apparently moral judgement which is presented as necessary. From a confessional point of view – the kind of thing about which preacher ought to be able say something helpful – the issue is not so much the decision we make, but our justification of it: our desire to know, and for you to know and finally, of course, for *God* to know, that we have acted rightly, as it was necessary to act. Knowing this, we are safe; such knowledge is a moral and theological fortress. “We have a law...”

What does the opposite look like? It takes a life time to learn, and so to explain, that. But we might glean a clue from our poet this morning:

*And God held in his hand  
A small globe...  
The son looked...  
As through water, he saw...  
...On a bare  
Hill a bare tree saddened  
The sky. Many people  
Held out their thin arms  
To it...  
  
... The son watched  
Them. Let me go there, he said.*

“Let me go there.”

There is nothing necessary here. There is no necessity in Jesus coming as he did – at least, nothing necessary except the desire to love in the Son himself. It was not “necessary” that Jesus die, at least not so far as God was concerned; it was only necessary for those who had a law.

Non-necessity in human relations looks like the work of Jesus – coming, living, dying. It is freedom, gift, grace, and all of this in the midst of laws which bind, take, predetermine.

In this, non-necessity – the path to the cross – looks suspiciously like resurrection, for what can the dead demand? Death is the end of law; the dead have no “if” from which to lever a “then”. But perhaps more of that on Sunday.

Today, Good Friday, it is enough to declare that Bad is Broken – that particular bad which masquerades as good because we've found a "good" argument for it, the bad which is defence against the other, the "had to be done" which protects me but kills you.

*This* is God's gift; this is why this bad Friday is Good.

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