

Good Friday
10/4/2020

Mark the Evangelist

Matthew 27:11-31
Psalm 22

Reflection by Rev. Em. Prof. Robert Gribben

Good Friday rather silences me. Everything about it raises questions, and profound matters worthy of a lifetime's contemplation.

Since the age of 19, when the *World Record Society* put out a disc of it, I have listened to Bach's St Matthew Passion on Good Friday afternoon. It was years before I realised its origin, which is in the pre-Reformation custom of chanting a whole Gospel Passion twice in Holy Week. In our ecumenical days, the Uniting Church has re-adopted it.

Bach was a convinced son of the Reformation. But as a boy he knew about these Passions, and since they are simply the text of scripture, he had no objection to them. But he made some clear Reformed changes. The biblical words were chanted, with every word matched to a syllable of music (that is missed in English). It was in German, the vernacular, not in Latin. It was set for use in a congregation, not a concert, so there are chorales – congregational hymns - which Lutherans today sing. The pastor would add prayer, and there was Good Friday worship.

I think the Passions need a bit more work on them for contemporary worship. But as Bible reading used to be part of every Protestant's home life, reading the story of the Cross is a good and holy thing to go on doing! I want to suggest that you choose a Gospel and read last week of Jesus' life up to his burial, sometime over this weekend. It can take as long as you want, but Mark's is the shortest. You can take breaks, if not for a chorale, for a cuppa.

Each evangelist has a distinctive perspective. **Mark** emphasises the isolation of Jesus: betrayed, God-forsaken and denied by the disciples, mocked and tortured by his enemies. It has been said of **Luke**, that he 'transposes the passion from the key of tragedy to the key of pathos'. It is a martyrdom of a man who deeply loves his fellow human beings and cries for their forgiveness. **John** paints a picture of a royal figure, transcending the cross. God's glory is never far away. **Matthew** also sees a royal figure, but a royalty which shows itself in humiliation and humility.

Contemplating the cross is not a comfortable thing to do. We have all seen gory mediaeval crucifixes in the Catholic churches we have visited in Europe, and devotions based on the bleeding Christ have been used for centuries. Of course, Protestants have their equivalent, but ours are verbal crucifixes.

Think of Isaac Watts's incomparable hymn, *When I survey the wond'rous Cross*:

3. See from his Head, his Hands, his Feet,
Sorrow and Love flow mingled down!
Did e'er such Love and Sorrow meet?
Or Thorns compose so rich a Crown?

And from the recently rediscovered verse and its vivid image,

4. His dying Crimson, like a Robe,
Spreads o'er his Body on the Tree;

There are many ways of telling the Passion story, and hymns are one.

It is interesting that a very favourite old hymn has survived our unsentimental age, even into *Together in Song*, from which many oldies and goodies have disappeared: *There is a Green Hill far away*. Too sentimental and childish? you may think, by contrast with the noble Watts. Let me attempt a brief defence.

It was a hymn for children. It is a Passion narrative, and the key elements are there. Cecil Frances Alexander (1818-95) actually lived by a walled city - 'without a city wall' she might have said - but she herself later changed it to 'outside' in case it confused the children! She was the wife of the Church of Ireland bishop of Londonderry. That should make her a raging evangelical, but the preface to her *Hymns for Little Children* (1848) was written by the notorious Dr Keble, leader of the High Church Oxford movement.

[The words are on screen]

1, In fact, it was part of a project to write a children's hymn for each of the sections of the Apostles' Creed. *All things bright and beautiful* was for 'creator of heaven and earth', and *Once in Royal David's City* 'born of the virgin Mary'. This one is for Good Friday.

'There is a green hill far away outside a city wall...' Her Irish readers would know about green hills. Would it have helped to observe there was no hill at Calvary? Helena, mother of the emperor Constantine had the land around the tomb cut away so as to be seen. But in four lines, she sets the scene for her context. She is more in the spirit of Luke than John, but that is part of our rich biblical inheritance.

2. The **second verse** ponders the mystery of the cross, 'We may not know, we cannot tell what pains he had to bear...' The passion of Jesus, though impossible to imagine, let alone explain, calls us to faith: 'we believe it was for us' - 'for us and for our salvation' as the creed says.

Verses 3 and 4 contrast the innocence of Jesus with the evil done to him. The big words are all there: 'forgiven, saved, sin' and opening heaven's gate. You might think that 'to make is good' is a bit lame, but it ought not to be that way: the world at the moment is only managing because there *are* people who are good. What words would you use? It is a tremendous challenge to every preacher. How can we express our faith that on that Godly Friday, something happened to the power of sin and death?

5. And her **last verse** simply calls for a response. Does anyone want to question that 'dearly, dearly has he loved'? (The word has two meanings.) Is that not the message of the entire Bible? It is wonderfully modest: so 'we must love him too', 'and try his works to do'.

True, there are greater Easter hymns, for adults, and for our day. And there are worse hymns for children than Mrs Alexander's. Even in a single congregation, our understanding is at many levels. We all start as children and deepen our understanding as we learn more of life and love and suffering and death. Perhaps we should revisit it at times as little children.

Bach understood the role of human emotion in faith. For me, the most moving moment in the Matthew Passion is the word from the cross, which in all translations remains in the Aramaic of Jesus: *Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani*, and then, echoing the King James Bible, 'which is to say, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"'

Many are asking that question now, because this death-dealing, devilish disease, like the plagues of old, is silently and swiftly changing everything, and we can do little about it, except to wait. The cry of dereliction is heard in our day.

So what do God's Easter People have to say? Can we at least remember the last word from the cross, a single word in the Greek: *tetelestai*, lamely rendered in English, 'It is finished', but better, 'It is accomplished'.

But we must wait 'three days' to discover once more, how Jesus' prayer was answered.
