

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 51

John 12:20-33

The awful truth

In our Lenten study book this year, author Sam Wells, remarks that we tend to invoke euphemisms when we find suddenly ourselves out of our depth – not “died” but “passed away”, not “going to the toilet” but “going to the bathroom”, not “a little bit stupid” but “not the full quid”. The euphemism refers to the presence of something that seems both necessary but also inappropriate to acknowledge – it doesn’t seem “proper” to bring *that* up *here*.

In our Gospel reading today Jesus speaks once more (cf. last week) of his approaching crucifixion as a “lifting up”: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (v.32; cf. also John 3.14f; 8.28). We know, of course, what he refers to – his impending crucifixion. And we know something of the horror a crucifixion was. So, is Jesus being euphemistic here, softening the blow for those he addressed, throwing a fig leaf over the embarrassing nakedness of God in the crucifixion? In churches which have crucifixes – representations of the figure of Jesus on the cross – there are not many without loincloths.

In fact, the “lifting up” is no euphemism. The evangelist John loves double meanings and the ironies which come with them. The Greek word here can certainly apply to being lifted up on a cross. But, at the same time, it can just as naturally be used for that kind of elevation which is an *enthronement*. A king’s coronation could be said to be his “lifting up”. The cross, then, becomes a throne, the crown of thorns truly a crown.

Yet the point is not now that Israel unknowingly crucified its king. The ambiguity of “lifted up” allows John to present to us Jesus as being *both* outcast *and* enthroned, being both crucified and made king, *in the single* “lifting up”. Not simply the king *mistakenly or unknowingly* crucified, Jesus *becomes* king in his very being crucified.

And so Jesus can also say in our text this morning, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be *glorified*” (v.23), and to mean by this that the cross itself is the glorification (cf. also John 12.16; 13.31f; 17.7). The lifting up, the crucifixion, is the glory of Christ. (We might add here that the glory is *not* the resurrection. In the crucifixion we see something about the nature of God which the resurrection by itself cannot show). John presents a vision of God in which God’s glory – and so God’s very being – is tied up with his relationship to a people which falls short of his covenant call, to the extent that they (we) even crucify the Lord of glory.

When John says, then, that God so loved the world that he sent the Son, he is not speaking about the “size” of God’s love, as if God might have loved less or even more. Rather, the cross *is* the love: this is God’s presence to and for the world. *How God loves* is itself God. God *is* the glorification on the cross, God comes into view *here*.

This is not an easy thought to think, but it is crucial in a world which thinks God irrelevant because we imagine that God to be “out there” beyond us, or deep, deep within us. In either case, we don’t imagine that God is in the messy time and space in which we live, not in the times and spaces between us.

But against the God who is nowhere useful is the impossible proclamation that the greater the distance we place between ourselves and God – the more strained our relationship with God is – the more God is set free to be God. That is, God's love for us is shown to be all the more remarkable when he exercises that freedom to overcome the distance, in order to be life and love for us. When St Paul says that where sin abounds, grace abounded even more, he says the same as John's double reading of the cross: God makes shame into glory. This is not, of course, to justify or even promote sin(!); it is only to declare that God's grace always outreaches human brokenness. (Children's talk: God is very stretchy).

The God who is the cross, then, is no "idea" of God which we fill with other ideas like love or judgement, according to our need. God is no euphemism we are forced to invoke to refer to an embarrassing truth we wish we didn't have to acknowledge or negotiate around. Rather, the God who is the cross is the very *revelation* of our condition. For, whatever else we might be, such a God as this reveals us to be those who would crucify God. Ours is the crucified God because this is the only God who has come close enough to us to be precisely *our* God, the God of those who are capable of crucifying each other, even of crucifying God.

The gospel, then, presents us with two possibilities.

The first possibility is the pessimistic conclusion that the cross is only the work of human hands. The story – the story of Jesus and of each of us – ends with the violent rejection of one who deserved better, and that story is simply tragic. The awful truth here is that it doesn't get any better than this, but it might perhaps get worse. We need a mouth full of euphemisms to speak the truth here because it is more than we can bear.

The second possibility is that the cross is indeed the work of human hands, but that it is also the glory of God, in the terms we've described. This is to say that the cross is not tragic, is not the end of the story, but is the sign of how far God is able to reach – how "stretchy" God is – to embrace again those who have rejected God so profoundly. This would also be an aw-ful – *awesome* – truth, but now one which must be said as clearly and directly as possible, so that we all might understand.

Faith – or unfaith – is a decision about these two possibilities. Can God reach us or not, regardless of how far away we run? Can God reach us, regardless of how far away we push the possibly that God might be reaching for us, whether in Jesus on the dusty roads of Palestine 2000 years ago, or on those same dusty today in cries of God's children for justice and mercy, or in the quiet fears and loathings of our hearts?

Can God turn our tragic existence into God's own glory, and so into our healing? Can our deathly ways with ourselves and each other become the glory of God?

The awful-awesome God of the cross calls for an awe-filled faith:

Yes. Yes. Yes.

God can do this.

And it is by this expectation that we will live.
