

## **Good Friday Reflection 2019**

### **The Nature of God's Relationship with Humanity - the Mysterious Unity between the Death and Resurrection of Jesus**

'To be a Christian is to be attentive to signs of God's action in the world, and this is especially true in Holy Week and at Easter when – the faithful believe – Jesus by his death and resurrection revealed the nature of God's relationship with humanity.' Sometimes one finds profound theological statements in unlikely places. That sentence was from the first editorial in the Guardian on Wednesday 17th April. It is perhaps a slightly different way of putting the profound words 'God so loved the world that He gave His only son ...'

The three hours' devotion service on Good Friday is concerned with sacrifice, about Jesus' sacrifice, his terrible suffering and death. The service is unlike any other one in our Christian year. What makes it special is that we try to get really close to Jesus in his last hours, to understand what happened to him and what he did; as we often say in a theological context, to walk alongside him, or maybe rather to have him walk alongside us, in his time of trial.

To say the service is unlike any other one is not quite right, because every time we celebrate Holy Communion we remember Jesus' sacrifice - 'in the same night that he was betrayed, he took bread, and when he had given thanks to thee, he broke it and gave it to his disciples... and likewise after supper he took the cup; and when he had given thanks to thee, he gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of this, for this is my blood of the new covenant'. The heart of the Eucharist service is a memorial of the Last Supper, before Jesus's crucifixion and death. I'm not in any way trying to take away the significance of the holy Eucharist, but I am saying that the Good Friday service takes you further and takes you deeper in understanding, or rather, shall we say, in appreciating, what Jesus went through.

What I am going to try to do now is to address that question of understanding. I hope that you will more fully appreciate what Jesus

suffered, what he went through; and to some extent you will understand why, at least in the historical sense of who did what to whom.

I'm not going to touch on the mechanics of the crucifixion or the literal historical data; what I want to concentrate on is trying to explain it. Why did Jesus have to die?

Perhaps today it's more a question 'Why did He die?', not necessarily why he had to die. You could say, following the words of the Creed, that Jesus' death was for us - 'who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost and the Virgin Mary and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate'. Jesus himself said that 'greater love hath no man than that he should lay down his life for his friend'. (I am quoting from the Book of Common Prayer, 1662, and the Authorised Version of the Bible, 1611, so it is necessary to point out that 'man' means 'human being'). Or again, we hear that Jesus is the 'propitiation for our sins', making up for what we have done that is sinful.

There is a powerful romantic theme that occasionally people do heroic things where they suffer in somebody else's place. St Paul, in his letter to the Romans [5:7-8], contrasts what you might call ordinary heroism, risking your life or even losing your life, to save someone else whom you might not know particularly well, but have nothing against, and what Jesus appears to have done, which is to give his life not for just anybody but for people who definitely don't deserve it, who are sinners.

We don't really talk about ritual sacrifice much these days. The idea of going to a temple and slaughtering some animal to give it ritually to God is completely alien to us in our modern world. But I think we know how it was supposed to work: that nobody could measure up to God's perfect standard, and to the extent that you fell short – an example of falling short would be Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden - to the extent that you fell short you had to ask God for forgiveness, to make it up to him, to turn away God's wrath.

This is allied with the idea of the Last Judgement, either at the end of the world, (if we can imagine that), or at the end of a person's life. And again, although we couldn't really describe with any certainty what to expect at that End Time, as it is called, there is a very common idea that there will be some kind of last judgement; and indeed in the Bible at the end of St Matthew's Gospel there is a picture of the last judgement, the division of the sheep from the goats. 'The Son of Man shall come in his glory and all the holy angels with him. Then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory and before him shall be gathered all nations. And he shall separate them one from another as a shepherd divideth the sheep from the goats' (Matthew 25:31-32). In that context, Jesus is taking the punishment that sinful man would otherwise deserve.

But there is a little question mark. It is easy to miss this, but particularly in the context of this very solemn, contemplative service, when we are trying to get as close as we can to follow in Jesus's footsteps on the way to the place of the Skull, Golgotha, where he was crucified, the little niggle, if you like, is quite a major issue in fact. It is this. God gave his only son. What does the word 'gave' mean, here? God is, after all, the creator and sustainer of everything and everyone. Did He give his only son over to be hurt, to be whipped, to be insulted, to be humiliated, to be tortured and ultimately killed in the most bestial way? Because if he did that, how can we say that God is a loving God, that God wants the best for all of us, and if there is evil in the world, it has come in against God?

As you know, sin isn't just, isn't really at all, a question of doing bad things. It has a very particular meaning. It is about being separated, divided off from God, cut off from God. And the 'salvation' that we talk about, that we believe in, the eternal life - 'so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life' - that salvation is coming together with God, being united eternally. So in that context how could God give his nearest and dearest over to be horribly hurt and then killed? Something doesn't add up.

At the very least it looks as though there is a paradox. How could the good God hurt anyone, least of all his own son? And if you were concerned about that, put yourself in Jesus' position. You would

feel uniquely deserted. We will say, towards the end of this service, the terrible words of Psalm 22: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' It's what Jesus said as he suffered. There is no more terrible protest in the whole of literature. 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

But at the end of the Stations of the Cross, these days the last station is usually the station of the Resurrection. These days, particularly since the Roman Catholics dusted off the old idea in their second Vatican Council in the sixties, the most important message to the world from Easter is the message of what they call the Paschal Mystery, the 'unity of the death and resurrection of Jesus'. The Paschal mystery; the mystery is that unity, that putting together, of opposites; that everything to do with Jesus is the opposite of what you would expect.

Think of the Sermon on the Mount. Love your enemies. Turn the other cheek. Don't retaliate. The exact opposite of the normal thing to do. In the Beatitudes, everything is back to front. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit.' You would have thought in the context of being close to God himself - the most theological situation you could possibly be in - that the last thing you would possibly want, in heaven with God, is to have weedy people round you who have no particular spiritual gifts. But they are blessed. 'Theirs is the kingdom of heaven'. That's crazy.

It's more straightforward to understand 'Blessed are they that mourn'. For 'They shall be comforted'. That is a contrast, but it is an understandable one. You might hope for comfort. Jesus assures it. But 'Blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven.' Doesn't sound happy - but happiness is assured.

Think of the Magnificat, the most revolutionary text this side of Karl Marx. 'He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he hath sent empty away.' 'The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate.' Why don't we sing that verse of 'All things

bright and beautiful' any more? Mrs Alexander wasn't saying it was right when she wrote that verse. We shouldn't just shut it away. It's shocking, and it's meant to be.

There's a sort of tension on Good Friday, there's another sort of paradox; in a very sacramental way, for Jesus to be uniquely alive, alive in a new way that no-one had ever seen before, the opposite had to be true. He had to be very, very dead. But except in the very minimal sense that God, the creator and sustainer of all things, must be behind everything, everything that happens, I think we can explain Jesus' suffering, not in terms of cruelty by his father, but in terms of the waywardness of sinful man.

When you look at the details of the trial before Pontius Pilate, there isn't an inevitability about what happens. It is the active badness, the active sinfulness of the chief priests and scribes which catches Jesus. Pilate gave them a good way out if they had got carried away by the mob, by offering Jesus as the prisoner to be released in the traditional way at Passover time. But they positively chose - it was deliberate - to release the bad man and to kill off the good one. It was another paradox, and another counterintuitive.

But as you go through the Good Friday service, metaphorically walking behind the cross with Jesus, I do suggest that you can hold your head high and recognise him truly as your king, because that tomb will definitely be empty. This is Jesus working out the way to salvation: salvation, a relationship with God, a close relationship with God. That tomb will definitely be empty.

One implication of that is that there's no need for a priest to stand between us and God. Jesus is the great high priest, who has opened the sanctuary to us. In the letter to the Hebrews [chapter 10], we will hear that the Lord says 'I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more,' and the letter goes on to say, 'where there is forgiveness there is no longer any offering for sin. Therefore my friends since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way, that he opened for us through the curtain, let us approach with a true heart in full

assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience'.

It's not a question of buying off God's wrath. It's the other way round. God will raise Jesus from the dead, in the Easter morning miracle that we will joyfully celebrate. There it is. There is forgiveness and there is no longer any offering for sin. There will no longer be any blood sacrifice.

But first we must follow Jesus. To come out into his blessed light, we must follow him into the darkness.

*This is an edited version of a reflection originally given by Hugh Bryant at the Three Hours' Devotion service at St Mary's Church, Stoke D'Abernon, on 19th April 2019.*