

Good Friday Liturgy

St Mary's, Barnes, 2010

On Good Friday we try to reflect together about the meaning of Christ's death upon the cross. The creeds say that this was "for our salvation"-and the terms saviour and redeemer are familiar terms of devotion. But strange as it may seem the church has never had an official doctrine about how the death of Christ brings about our salvation. Instead there have been a series of theories or images, which have tried to bring out some aspect of this truth. Some of these now strike us as strange, if not alien.

So lets begin by asking ourselves what the redemption of the world would look like. It would, quite simply, be a world in we which we were perfectly at one with God and one another. The old word atonement gets it right. At-one-meant. It would be a world at one with the root of its being, in step with the Divine music in our hearts, in harmony with one another . A rather surprising person, D.H.Lawrence, begins one of his poems with the words "All that matters is to be at one with the living God."

What are the barriers to this living union? If we take seriously the teaching and ministry of Jesus it is difficult to think that they come from the side of God. What characterises the ministry of Jesus is that he went out of his way to include those whom others excluded. He mixed with them and had meals with them. And he taught that this pattern of his ministry was the pattern of God's himself in his relation with us. He is like the Shepherd who hunts the hills for the one lost sheep, and the woman who scrabbles on the floor for the one lost coin. In another memorable parable the Father stands outside his house scanning the horizon waiting for his wastrel son to return, and when he does he embraces him warmly and gives a great party to celebrate his homecoming. Clearly the barriers are

not put up on God's side. That leaves us. Is there something about us, something within us, that puts them up?

In Tolstoy's novel War and Peace a fashionable young army officer is given money by his father, and told that it is all he can afford at the moment. The young officer, Nikolai Rostov, goes off and contrary to all his intentions and against his better judgement finds himself gambling, and is so trapped that his losses spiral out of control into a huge sum that has to be paid next day. He goes to see his tough, gruff, fine old father and tries to put on a casual air.

"It can't be helped. It happens to everyone! Said the son in a free and easy tone, while in his heart he was feeling himself a worthless scoundrel whose whole life could not atone for his crime. He longed to kiss his father's hands, kneel and beg his forgiveness, while in a careless and even rude voice he was telling him that it happened to everyone!

The old count dropped his eyes when he heard these words from his son, and began to fidget about as though in search of something. "Yes, yes" he murmured, "It will be difficult, I fear, difficult to raise...happens to everybody! Yes, yes, it might happen to anyone..." And with a furtive glance at his son's face the count went out of the room. Nikolai had been prepared for opposition, but had not at all expected this. "Papa! Pa-pa! he called after him, sobbing. "Forgive me!" And clutching at his father's hand he pressed it to his lips and burst into tears.

He had expected opposition but had met instead with understanding, kindness and self sacrifice. It was this which pierced his heart, broke down his insouciance, and which brought about a deeper union with his father the other side of tears and sorrow. The barriers are not on God's side, but ours. For God goes all the way to meet us and break them down..

Austin Farrer, a great Anglican thinker who died a few years ago once wrote

Everything that God does has an abyss of mystery in it, because it has God in it. But in the saving action of the incarnation God came all lengths to meet us, and dealt humanly with human creatures... What then, did God do for his people's redemption? He came among them bringing his kingdom, and he let events take their human course. He set the divine life in human neighbourhood. Men discovered it in struggling with it, and were captured by it in crucifying it. What could be simpler? And what more divine?

But if that is what God did, simply coming amongst us, bringing his kingdom, setting the divine life in human neighbourhood-what about sin? People sometimes suggest that the kind of view suggested by Austin Farrer does not take sin seriously enough, so let us think about sin.

When we see or hear the news, or read the papers, we are often appalled at what we human beings do to one another. The people being killed in wars, more than 4 million in the Congo in recent years for example, not unrelated to the scramble for Congo's rich mineral resources; young gay men being hung in Iran or women being stoned; or the greed and reckless folly of some in the banking and financial sector that has brought the world's economy to its knees, with people being thrown out of their jobs and evicted from the houses. These things rightly make us angry. They fill us with a sense of moral outrage. And if that is how we feel, does not God feel the same. God is not a weak, anaemic, God. He cares about us, he is deeply affected by us-and one aspect of this must be that he too is outraged at the cruelties we inflict on one another. This is what the Bible means by that terrifying phrase, the wrath of

God. If it is right to use human language about God at all, and we want to say God cares about us, then to care is to be affected, and then includes anger. Yet still he does not give up on us.

A young man is in prison for a serious of crimes to feed a drug habit. In the course of these crimes he has badly hurt people. But his mother regularly visits him in prison. She still loves him, has not given up on him. She is still angry and deeply grieving that he should have turned out like this, but she still loves him and wants to be with him. So with God and us. He still loves us and wants to be with us-and as Farrer put it, he comes all lengths to meet us. But in meeting God's deep compassion and pity for us, we also meet his outrage-at those who sell drugs, for example, and ruin people's lives. What changes the relationship? What brings about at-one-ment between the mother and her son? She does not have to change her attitude. She loves him now and will continue to do so. It is he who has to change. He has to realise the full extent of the hurt he has caused to her and to others. So he expresses his deep remorse and sorrow, and mother and son embrace in tears of sadness and joy. What has happened to her anger? It is somehow dissolved in the mutual tears and joy of mother and son. It is not as though everything is forgotten, but it no longer on her mind and she certainly does not bring it up in conversation. So with God and us.

Sin is a difficult subject for anyone to talk about in our time, for society seems to have lost any sense of it. It is likely that when we contemplate our own shortcomings the language of the old Prayer Book, for example, seems rather over the top when it makes us say "Their burden is intolerable." So it is important to remember that in his incarnation Christ identifies with humanity as a whole, and that he lived and died and rose again, again as the old Prayer Book puts it "for the sin of the whole world". And we are here this morning not just for ourselves, but on behalf of humanity as a whole. We stand with all people, with whatever horrors they are

responsible for, because that is where Christ stood and continues to stand. That said, we can never distance ourselves, our own lives and motives and secret thoughts from those perpetrators of terrible things. Reinhold Niebuhr got it right when in one of the prayers he wrote during World War II he has the sentence

We pray for wicked and cruel men, who arrogance reveals to us what the sin of our own hearts is like when it has conceived and brought forth its final fruit.

The confession which we used last night at the Maunday Thursday Liturgy, from the Church of Sweden, again gets it right, we say

Through my sin I am guilty of more than I understand,
And share in the world's alienation from you.

God's love remains steadfast. It is we who have to change, not him. What brings about change is an awareness of the lengths to which God has gone, at what cost, to remain with us in the prison of our pride and self preoccupation. It is that love that enables us to face what we as human beings do to one another and God. But facing that can be painful. T.S.Eliot wrote of the gifts reserved for old age in the following words

And last, the rending pain of re-enactment
Of all that you have done, and been; the shame
Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
Of things ill done and done to others' harm
Which once you took for exercise of virtue.

Sometimes we have to face this painful self-knowledge in this life. If not, it is what I suppose is called purgatory: looking into the infinite compassion of God , which at the same time brings us face to face with ourselves.

Jesus came amongst us proclaiming the Kingdom of God. He knew he had to take this message to the Jerusalem and he knew what this would lead to. He knew it would result in opposition and death. But he offered his life to his Father and his friends. So at the Last Supper, he took the bread, broke it and thinking of the cross next day said “This is my body which is given for you.” That broken body was the price of our redemption. It was not demanded of God, but it is the cost to God of coming all the way to meet us and be with us in the extremes of human existence.

The remarkable French woman Simone Weil once wrote

All the criminal violence of the Roman Empire ran up against Christ and in him became pure suffering...The false god changes suffering into violence. The true God changes violence into suffering.

That suffering was not just the terrible physical pain, one of the worst tortures devised by us cruel human beings, but the spiritual anguish of entering into the darkness of our alienation from God. On the cross Jesus cries out “My God, my God why have you forsaken me.” In the 17th century in Spain painters started to depict Jesus alone on the cross against a black background. Alone and desolate, rather than surrounded by crowds. It is perhaps this that Paul is trying to indicate when in a startling image he says that Christ was made sin for us, or in a more modern translation

Christ was innocent of sin, and yet for our sake God made him one with human sinfulness, so that we might be made one with the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5, 21)

Jesus became one with human sinfulness. He enters into the literal hell of our separation from God. Indeed in Christian thought and art it is at this point that Jesus descends to hell to conquer death,

and release humanity from its grip. He enters hell on our behalf, and because is still the Eternal Son at one with his father lifts that hell to God.

Mattins at this time in the Orthodox church puts it this way

To earth hast thou come down, O master, to save Adam, and not finding him on earth, thou hast descended into hell, seeking him there.

Uplifted on the cross, thou hast uplifted with thyself all living men; and then descending beneath the earth thou raises up all that lie buried there.

The whole creation was altered by thy Passion; for all things suffered with thee, knowing, O Lord, that thou holdest all in unity.

Or as Julian of Norwich put it

At this point be he began first to show his might, for then he went into hell, and when he was there, then he raised up the great root out of the deep darkness, which rightfully was knit to him in high heaven.

There are many kinds of darkness that people go through, mental illness, rejection as a child, Alzheimers, Motor Neurone disease but terrible though they are, there is a darkness more impenetrable than them all- that alienation from God which means death to any true meaning to our life. Christ entered that pitch black, that hell, for us, to be with us, stay with us, and hold us in union with our Heavenly Father, now, through death and through whatever lies after.

There is a final point that is so obvious, it is very easy to overlook. It is that if God thought it necessary for our eternal salvation to enter the flux of human history and change it from within, that necessity has not changed. His work continues in and through us.

God works ceaselessly and secretly in the hearts of all people. But if that was enough the Eternal Word would not have become flesh. It was not enough and it is still not enough, and God continues his redemptive purpose through his body on earth, the communion of Christian believers. Jesus made it clear in his teaching that God holds us to himself through thick and thin. He laid down only two conditions for that relationship to be kept open from outside. First the necessity of *metanoia*, re-thinking and re-ordering our lives in the light of his message about God's kingly rule, and secondly, our willingness to reach out to others as God has reached out to us. "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us" we pray daily. This is not a question of wiping the slate clean. It is holding others in a relationship as God holds us. This was a message the Jesus re-enforced through a number of vivid parables. As an old verse puts it

He drew a circle that shut me out
Heretic, rebel a thing to flout.
Love and I had the wit to win
We drew a circle that took him in.

God's circle takes us in and we are to draw a circle that takes others in. In this way the work of the incarnate Christ continues, and must continue until Kingdom come. In Christ God has shown himself to be for us. He shows himself to be for others through us-through our willingness to be with them and for them at all times and in all circumstances.