

Holy Week Meditation – The Via Dolorosa

After Christ's sham trial for blasphemy by the corrupt governor of the province, Jesus was sentenced to death by crucifixion. This was not just a means of execution but an act of state terror to keep the populace in order and to remind them of the cost of stepping out of line.

Part of the ritual of execution was the humiliation of carrying part of one's instrument of torture on one's back to the site of impending death. In Jesus's case this was the place called Golgotha often referred to by its Latinized name, Calvary.

Jesus's torturous last journey to Calvary has become one of the most familiar of all aspects of his Passion, not least because it has been visited by millions over the centuries both literally and metaphorically. During the Middle Ages the desire grew in Europe to identify more closely with Christ's suffering and so many chose to make the long and dangerous pilgrimage to the holy sites of Jerusalem. There, under the guidance of the Franciscan custodians, the pilgrims could walk along what was known as the Via Dolorosa (the Sorrowful Way) or Via Crucis (Way of the Cross) and retrace Christ's final steps. Various locations along the route were marked with crosses, a total of 22 but this was later reduced to 14 which became points of devotion and prayer corresponding to stages along that route to Golgotha.

When it later became increasingly difficult to visit these sites because of the conquest of Palestine by the Ottoman Turks, the route was effectively brought back to Christendom and displayed in churches throughout Europe in what became known as the Stations of the Cross which is a pictorial reconstruction of the road to Calvary. These devotional images, called Stations because they

are always confronted standing, began to flourish in the fifteenth century and remain popular today. In many churches they are fixed paintings or sculptures in place the year round. In some, they appear only in Holy Week and they can be viewed now here in St. Mary's.

On Wednesday this week we have the opportunity to walk the Stations of the Cross. Perhaps it is the first time this tradition has been observed in this church, or perhaps we are re-introducing a custom that has fallen by the way. Either way, it is an opportunity for us to seek to come closer to Christ and to understand the love he has for us and all humanity. It is a chance for us to identify with Jesus in his suffering. The purpose is not to indulge a desire to feel pain but to seek to be infused with the love of Christ that enabled him to endure unjust pain for the sake of others. Walking the Stations should help us to feel compassion for people who suffer in our world today. It should make us more aware of the needs of our world and it might renew our desire to show compassion and to strive for justice.

The images that we have here are painted by the contemporary German artist and priest Sieger Koder. This collection has been given the title – The Folly of God. It is a very apposite title because it captures something of the scandal of the cross as the means by which God might effect salvation for us and all humanity. Those Jews and Gentiles who watched Jesus carry his cross and be crucified upon it were equally appalled at the idea that this could be the fate of God - to die such a humiliating death. Ever since, many have found it a laughable folly that God himself might be reduced to such a demeaning end. Friedrich Nietzsche in his book *Anti-Christ* claimed that if Christians were naturally strong and confident, they would have a God who is destructive as well as good. He suggested a God who counsels love of enemy, as well as of

friend, is a God of a people who feel themselves as perishing and without hope. Weak, decadent, and sick people, whose will to power has declined, will give themselves a God who is purely good.

It is hard for many to see how a God who can be brought so low as to be crucified can be a source of strength and transformation. Yet it has been the conviction of Christians down through the centuries that whilst the tragic fate of Jesus Christ might appear to be a folly, in truth it is the source of all hope. For by experiencing the basest and cruelest of human suffering (torture and execution) God comes closer to us and thus more able to be the agent of our salvation. This is the mystery of incarnation – Christ's end is the natural partner to the birth of God's son in a grubby stable in little Bethlehem. In experiencing the lowest of all human suffering, God becomes more able to redeem it.

I think we can see the same process at work in the life of Princess Diana which partly explains why she was held in such great affection by so many people in our nation and beyond. Despite her elevated status as a member of the Royal Family she was understood to have great compassion for vulnerable and marginalised people: including people with AIDS and HIV, survivors of landmines and many others. People felt that her status did not make her aloof but she made herself accessible and so became an object of affection, even in death, of reverence. Many people gave testimony to the impact she had on their lives by giving them hope or encouragement by the attention she gave to them.

The incarnation of God rests on a similar dynamic. That God rather than remaining detached in his heavenly realm makes himself available and accessibly by entering into our human, creaturely world. Rather than being less divine by contaminating himself with human life and death, God in Christian

thinking becomes enabled truly to reach out to us and save us from our all too miserable state. The writer of the letter to the Philippians puts it like this:

“And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death--even death on a cross”

It is in carrying his cross and dying upon it that we see Christ's humanity and divinity in dynamic tension but which makes us more able to relate to God and to believe that his love is able to redeem and save us.

As we walk through this Holy Week and perhaps especially as we walk the Stations of the Cross keep in mind the way in which Jesus's frailty draws us nearer to God. Christ's passion is not intended to sanctify or glorify suffering but to show that in experiencing the worst of the human condition, He chooses to make himself closer to us. For even though few of us will come near to suffering the pain and degradation of torture and execution it is intended to encapsulate the human predicament writ large. Holy Week is not intended as a time of misery and self flagellation but as a vehicle for a growing self-understanding. In the same way that whilst Hamlet and King Lear are desperate tragedies yet they convey truth of human experience that do not force us to leave the theatre miserable – rather we are elevated by our refreshed understanding of our real selves.

Christ's life, ministry, death and resurrection are intended to show us our true selves and God's real self. If we can internalise these truths this week then we may well be able to live our lives more truthfully, creatively and fruitfully.