

Passion Sunday Sermon by Bishop Richard Harries

17th March 2024

St Mary's, Barnes

Jeremiah 31.31-4: John 12.20-33

This Sunday is Passion Sunday when we begin to focus on the suffering and death of Christ. It is a good time to try to think about the meaning of this event. In the Nicene Creed we say of Christ 'For us and for our salvation he came down for our salvation'. What do we mean by this? If you have often puzzled to make sense of it you are in good company-so has the church in every generation, especially today when so many of the assumptions in our culture are inimical to Christian faith.

The church has never had an official view of how Christ brings about our salvation. Unlike our doctrine of God, where there is a very strict orthodox understanding, there have simply been a number of theories. These theories of the atonement as they are called simply take a dominant image and explore how it helps us understand what Christ has done for us. They may have been helpful for their time but all in the end fail. So let us simply begin with that word atonement: at-one-ment.

We might say of two people that they are at one, or perhaps after a quarrel that they are at one again. From a Christian point of view it is fundamental that we are at one with God. Moment by moment we are held in being by the source of all existence. It would not seem sensible or healthy to turn away from that source. Moment by moment we are enfolded in a love that desires our well being. It would not seem sensible or healthy to ignore that love. There is an ultimate reality that is good, all good, our true and everlasting good. It would not seem sensible or healthy to spurn that good. To live a truly human life we need to be at one with the ground of our being; with

the love that desires our well being and with the supreme goodness in whom our good is found.

But humanity has turned away from that good. We have only to look at the pitiful state of the world around us to know that something has gone fundamentally wrong; that we are slithering around in a mess of our own making.

But God did not leave us in this mess. First he chose a people in whom to reveal his purpose and then he focussed that purpose in a person, Jesus. Jesus came proclaiming the rule of God and inviting people to live in his Kingdom. He taught that God is like a good shepherd looking for a lost sheep, or a woman for a lost coin. God wanted to gather people in, into himself and into a community of mutual giving and receiving.

But his message was rejected and he was killed. Political and religious power combined with elements of the mob to get rid of him. That might have been the end of it. But it wasn't. His followers discovered that he was alive in a new way as a power in their own lives, a power that assured them of their own destiny beyond death.

We cannot overestimate the shock of this. They had fled in failure and fear and now suddenly everything was different, totally different, the world would never look the same again. The cross, the cruellest of tortures invented by cruel human beings became a mark of identity, as though a group suddenly adopted the gallows or electric chair to put on coat of arms. The cross was no longer a badge of shame, but a sign of how far God was prepared to go to gather humanity to himself. Sometimes a suffering figure was shown on it, making plain what this had cost God. Sometimes as in this church, the cross was bare, proclaiming that Christ is risen and dwelling in our hearts. So if we ask what then did God do for our salvation the answer in the words of Austin Farrer is:

In the saving action of the incarnation God came all lengths to meet us, and dealt humanly with human creatures....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?

What this makes clear is that salvation is about being in a relationship with a reality who reaches out to us in Christ crucified, risen and glorified. It is at the same time an invitation that leads us to question ourselves and which turns our lives round. It is an invitation that breaks down barriers of pride and false self-sufficiency. Confronted with that suffering figure on the cross a large question mark is raised against so many of the assumptions and presuppositions of our society and we who live within it. It radically affects the way we see the world and shapes the way we try to live.

God is not an angry God who needs appeasing or propitiating. And there is no creditor of justice who has to be paid off. There is simply God, God in his eternal outreach to us in Christ. As Julian of Norwich put it: 'I understood that the Lord looks on his servant with pity and not with blame.'

The first reading this morning from Jeremiah talked about the time when there would be a new covenant, a new solemn agreement between God and humanity, when the divine law would be within us, and written on the human heart. Then 'I shall be their God and they shall be my people' and 'they will all know me'. This covenant, this binding love has been brought to us in Christ.

But this at-one-ment has not been brought about without cost. I think of a mother whose son has been caught up in drugs and crime. She regularly visits him in prison. Often he is difficult and rude to her. She does not give up on him. She bears it. Perhaps one day he will come to his senses and embrace her again. But all the while she has borne the cost of the pain. Today's Gospel contained the words of Jesus 'Now my soul is troubled' or as another translation puts it. 'Now my soul is in turmoil'. It is the Johannine version of the agony in the

Garden of Gethsemene. In his painting of that scene Roualt inscribed some words of Pascal 'Christ is in agony until the end of time.'

What I have said so far has focussed on the individual and their turning to their true good. But Christian faith down the ages has wanted to go beyond this and say that Christ's death and resurrection is 'for the whole world' as the old Prayer Book put it. Something has been put right in the very nature of things. Some of the way this has been talked about are antiquated and some of them are morally unacceptable but the truth here is that there is no limit to the saving power of God in Christ, in this life or in the one to come. In Christ heaven and earth, God and humanity are joined never to be unjoined. And in Christ God bears the pain of human hate-for everyone. No one is excluded and God does not give up on anyone. For God wills all to be saved and come to the truth.

Our salvation is simply to live at one with the ground of our being and the goal of our longing, in this life and the one to come. In Christ on the cross God invites us to do just that and in response his Spirit stirs in our hearts. So to that Spirit, with the Son and the Father, be all glory now and evermore.