

Sermon Good Friday Year B 2018

One of the sad ways many people approach life and engage with the world is through layers of distrust and violence, cynicism and suspicion. Even if it is a *tragic way* to perceive the wonder of the world around us, it remains for many people a *defining way* of perceiving the world around us. We would of course be right in seeing this as not ideal! Even if it does seem to be the default position between so many individuals and communities, tribes and nations, we know, deep down, *there must be* a better way. Distrust and violence, cynicism and suspicion will never be the path to full, content, abundant life. So often these ruptures in our relationships (whether between couples or nations and every kind of human ordering in-between) come about because of a failure to listen; a failure to appreciate the other and their legitimacy; and a failure to allow ourselves to be open, honest and accountable to the other party. But as with most things, it is easy to point the finger at others; to tut tut; to imagine it is always someone else's problem, someone else's issue. Only reluctantly do we admit *our* contribution to this disorder.

So perhaps we could think of all the little tricks and techniques we use to keep ourselves from being close and open with each other. We do all sorts of things to keep others at bay, to protect our privacy, to hold on to what we imagine is our own. For sure, we lock our doors, speak only through the wire screen, erect high fences around our houses. But think also of all the little lies, the little half-truths we tell so people won't truly know who we are. Think also of how we only let certain people know certain things. We disclose ourselves to others only ever very guardedly and partially. But perhaps one of the greatest pathologies of our day that really keeps us from others - and those we might otherwise hope to be close to - is our busyness. Too busy to be still, too busy to be reflective or pray, too busy to foster intimacies with others. And so, only ever skimming the surface of things, only ever operating on a superficial level, only ever able to engage with others from a distance. The high fences around our homes reflect perhaps the high fences around our hearts. We keep people away. We do not allow anyone to really come close, to really, truly, deeply know us. We are terrified of appearing vulnerable.

Looking to Christ on the Cross and we see one *completely* vulnerable, one utterly exposed, whose heart is laid bare for all, who holds nothing back. As the stories of Genesis tell us, in the Garden of Eden, Adam falls in pride and takes of the forbidden fruit of the tree. Having taken from this tree, Adam's first realisation is his nakedness, and so seeks to clothe himself. Adam and Eve cover themselves in response to their shame, and then seek to hide from God. But in remedy to the death brought by Adam's *pride* we see Christ naked on the tree of the Cross who thus brings life by his complete *obedience*. Whereas Adam *asserts* himself and must then cover his nakedness, Christ *denies* himself and is thus exposed.

All the Gospel writers highlight the detail that as Christ is crucified, he is stripped of his garments by the attending soldiers, which are then divided by the casting of lots. John - whose Passion we have just heard - quotes Psalm 22, one of the principal texts the early Christians looked to for understanding and making sense of Jesus' death. *"This was to fulfil the scripture, 'They*

parted my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.” Now, John makes special mention of the *seamless tunic*. For John - as for all the evangelists, really - no detail is incidental. So, in highlighting to us the seamless tunic he is wanting to highlight *something more* than a casual detail.

Flavius Josephus, the first century Jewish historian (and one of the most important non-biblical sources from the time of Jesus) points out that the high priests' garment was woven from *a single thread*. So, it is possible that the gospel writer John has this in mind and so points us towards Jesus' high-priestly dignity. Jesus who ministers and intercedes as priest is an idea of great importance to John. In John's way of seeing things Jesus on the Cross is, then, both priest but also the lamb, dying when the Passover lamb is sacrificed. According to Leviticus, the high priest alone could make atonement for his house and for the people. On the cross, only is Jesus Israel's *true king*, as the placard above his head attests. He is also the *high priest* accomplishing his high priestly ministry precisely in the hour of his most extreme dishonour, at the moment of his supreme vulnerability.

The Church Fathers, though, saw another aspect emerge when considering the seamless tunic. With the soldiers reluctant to tear the garment, they saw an image of the indestructible unity of the church. The seamless garment, then, is an expression of the *unity* that Jesus the high priest implored for his followers on the night before he suffered in the high priestly prayer of Jesus earlier in the Gospel. *Father, may they be one, just as you and I are one*. For the evangelist John, Jesus' priesthood - the sacrifice he makes of himself - *and* the unity of his followers are inseparably linked.

You would be aware that one of the frequent criticisms aimed against the church is its division and the disunity it suffers. Yes, *Christians* are divided and it is a scandal, indeed a grave sin. And any faithful Christian must be committed to unpicking the barriers which divide, which keep us from one another. But while *Christians* might be divided, the Church is *not* divided. As the creed emphatically states, *we believe in One Church*. The church is one because *Christ* is one. Our task, as the people of the Cross, is to allow what is *already* true to be reflected in our lives. And sometimes that will mean a degree of vulnerability, of openness, of daring to let go of that which is inessential.

In a few moments, the veiled Cross will be carried through the church. And at three stations we stop and the cloth - the seamless robe, if you will - is gradually removed. And before us, as he was on the hill on Calvary, Christ is there exposed for us. It *ought* to unsettle us. So often we close ourselves off from God and each other, we create barriers, we do anything to prevent us from appearing vulnerable. Seeing our naked, exposed Lord *ought* to remind us how often we cloak ourselves in protective layers. But as we come forward and make our veneration - a kiss, a touch, a genuflection, a bow - let us be mindful that all the life, hope and promise we enjoy as followers of Jesus comes from his vulnerability. As we gaze upon his broken body let us remember - and be thankful - that our life with God and our life with each other comes from his humble submission; from his exposing all to the world;

from his holding nothing back; from his daring to let all barriers fall away.
Amen.