

Sermon Good Friday Year B 2024

What sense are we to make of this day? How is it that we call it a 'good' day when all indicators are that it recalls a very 'bad' day? Even if we are very sure and confident in our faith, this day remains a challenging one. And it certainly pushes hard against the bright optimism with which we are supposed to live. It sits uncomfortably alongside the 'happyology' that has so infiltrated our popular culture. The very mood of today confounds so many of the values that surround us. The goals of success and attractiveness and youth are out of place for us today. Today's enforced public holiday likewise confounds. Walking through Alma Park this morning with the congregation from St Mary's for the Stations of the Cross was met (as usual) with bemusement and confusion. This 'good' day is a strange day.

This strangeness is present even for people of sincere faith. At the centre of this day, of course, stands the Cross. And in the Cross - in a strange way - we see *two essential aspects of our faith* combined. The very emblem of the Cross is a unity of opposites. The very shape of the Cross is of two beams intersected. It unites the horizontal and vertical. Its very shape points to both heaven and earth. It joins together opposing forces. So, in a strange way, this day pulls together seeming opposites.

On the one hand, this day exposes us to the sheer brutality, the depravity of humankind. This day lays out for us the vicious cruelty men are capable of. Having heard once more the account of the Passion, we are reminded of the deceit and malicious intent we can impose on others. We are reminded of the sheer barbarity, the murderous motivations that can darken the human soul. We are reminded of the betrayals and failings we are all capable of. In short, we are reminded of the depths of human sin - our fallenness - the wickedness that (left unchecked) can rise from us all.

But in hearing the account of the Passion once more, we are not just looking back. Our commemoration of the Cross today is not just to remember a time 2000 years ago and a place outside the walls of Jerusalem, and a hill – Golgotha – where Jesus of Nazareth died. We do not just look back. Today, we do not gather simply to recall the death of some ancient hero. If the cross of Jesus means anything - anything at all – it means something *for us*. And that requires us to accept some hard truths. Good Friday requires us to be honest. It might be very easy for us to be distracted by the question, *who is to blame for Jesus' death?* Should it fall on Judas? Or the Romans? Pilate? Should we blame the religious authorities, or the misguided crowd?

A long and venerable tradition would have us consider on this day how *we* have crucified our Lord. That's the honesty that is required of us today, on this Good Friday. That is the hard truth. It is not some 'other'. Not 'them'. But 'me'. The cross beam that takes full account of our sin and culpability will have us see that it is our hands that struck him. It is our spit that fell on his face. It is our taunts that mocked him. It is our hands that held the hammer. It is our sins that pin him to the wood of the Cross.

In the Passion account we have heard this afternoon, we might suppose that it tells us of just one trial: of Jesus questioned before Annas and Caiaphas. But as that story unfolds, it is interrupted by another trial: that of Peter. Peter here, we might suppose, stands for Every Christian. In the Passion story, then, we are faced with two trials. One in which Jesus affirms his consistent testimony and is punished with a slap in the face, to then be handed over to Pilate for his ultimate fate. In all this, Jesus shines out as the Perfect Innocent One, yet is condemned nonetheless. In Peter's trial, he *rejects* his real relationship with Jesus and goes free. It is a terrible moment. But encapsulates precisely what is going on today. *Our rejection of Christ* is what nails him to the Cross. Is this not sin? A *rejection* of God's good design for us? And Peter standing as Every Christian brings home the point: it is not some 'other' that crucified Our Lord, but 'me'.

In a short while, during this service, the Cross will be carried through the church, and we will be invited to make our Veneration. The custom of this day suggests that this veneration take the form of a kiss, a touch, or a genuflection. The clergy will remove their shoes – and you may also (just as Moses was instructed to do before the Burning Bush) because we are in the presence of a Great Mystery. Our approach to the Cross can be an emotional moment as we are brought to the foot of the cross and invited to feel the sorrow of this strange day.

To highlight this mournful atmosphere, the Church provides a hymn that ought to be sung during the Veneration of the Cross (as will be by our choir today). It is traditionally called the "Reproaches". This hymn has been part of the Western Liturgy for Good Friday since at least the 9th Century. The verses of this hymn - some of which are drawn from the Old Testament prophets, and others from Psalm 78 - call to mind the great events of salvation history. In the hymn, God speaks directly to his chosen people. God reminds his people – reminds us – of how he has saved them, and yet so consistently turn away from him. *O my people what have I done to you? Because I brought you out of the land of Egypt, thou hast prepared a Cross for thy Saviour.*

And then, *Because I led thee through the desert forty years and fed thee with manna, and brought thee into a land exceeding good, thou has prepared a cross for thy Saviour. What more could I do for thee that I have not done? I planted thee, my choicest vine, and thou has become exceeding bitter unto me. For when I was thirsty thou gavest me vinegar to drink...and hast pierced the side of thy Saviour.* Words spoken to God's people of old, as to Peter, and as surely as they are spoken to us.

It can be difficult to hear these words. Again, not spoken to some 'other', but to us. God speaks them because arise from *our* rejection of him. Have we not been delivered from slavery? And yet we are so willing to fall back into the things that diminish and enslave us. Have we not been brought into the Promised Land? And yet we seek distractions that take us away from it. Have we not been led from Egypt, and yet keep one eye open for better options? Have we not been led through the desert and fed with manna? And yet we fill our lives with those things that look no different from the place we have come from. The invitation is for us to hear these hard words *as words of love*. However hard it might be for us to hear God's reproach, they are meant to wake us up to the cost of the Cross. They are spoken to us so we be shaken out of the casual indifference we so often settle for. They are spoken in love so we might see *the cost* of our redemption.

If on the one hand, this day presents us with the unavoidable awfulness of the human condition, what then makes this day 'Good'? The Mystery of the Cross is that it *joins together* our rejection of God with God's sublime love for us. Interspersed in the verses of the Reproaches is an even more ancient hymn. So ancient we keep it in the original Greek: *Holy God, Holy and Strong, Holy and Immortal have mercy on us*. Mercy. It is God's mercy that transforms the Cross from a symbol of shame into an object of hope. Mercy that assures us that we are not condemned to our sins but that a bigger and better story can always be written into our lives. Mercy that restores us to God.

At the centre of this day is the Cross. Two beams that hold together two essential aspects of our faith. One, our rejection of God. The other, the sublime, eternal, redeeming love and mercy of God. In the Cross we see the hard truth of our condition, even as we see the sign of our salvation. In the Cross, we can be honest, even as we are hopeful. What makes this day 'Good' is that the cross is not for us the sign of defeat, but of victory. *By dying, he has destroyed our death*. We need not approach the Cross with fear, dread, or revulsion. We can approach it with love, gratitude, and veneration. Amen.