10 April 2020: Holy Week Reflections

Good Friday

John 18:1–19:42

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‘The Folly of the Cross’

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

In our world death is to be avoided. We know this only too well at the moment as we all take such serious actions to reduce the death toll from COVID-19. Yet, even before this pandemic we were constantly urged to eat, drink, exercise and behave in ways that will keep death at a distance. Drug companies spend millions on research to find drugs which may only increase life span, in some diseases, for a matter of months but are welcomed never the less. And, of course, this all makes sense. We know what it is like when someone we love dies, we know the pain of grief and the awful finality of their absence. We know that as the statistics are read out on our news each death is being mourned by those who knew and loved that individual.

We intellectually know that death is inevitable for us all but we live hoping somehow it will not touch us or those we love. And when it does happen, people find it hard to talk about. They discuss losing someone, people passing. Death is a taboo subject.

Good Friday brings us sharply up against suffering and death.

This was a harsh death of a relatively young man.

Jesus was whipped in a way that flayed his skin; the thorn crown was forced onto his head to
humiliate and to hurt. The timing of events, an all-night trial so that he was exhausted, the walk with the cross up the hill in the hottest part of the day encouraging the sweat of his body to increase the pain of the broken skin, the rough wood of the cross, the nails, the exposure, the thirst, the slow painful suffocation – all of this torture aimed to maximise the physical pain which he had to bear. Yet, He seems to accept this death; doing nothing to resist.

The cross was an example of humanity’s inhumanity. A carefully thought up process of execution, used as an expedient means to get rid of a potential trouble maker; a collusion between the religious status quo and the oppressive regime. It was meant to put an end to the teachings of Jesus. Here we have a violent death, death at the hands of others, state sanctioned execution. We know such things happen, we understand that Jesus is not the only innocent man to be killed on the orders of others. I knew a woman once who used to scoff at the idea of 3 hours of crucifixion. Her husband had died in a Japanese prisoner of war camp after months of starvation, torture and mistreatment. What is three hours, she would say?

We know that humanity has done even worse than crucifixion, terrible as that was, and we know that torture both authorised and hidden continues to be part of human reality. Suffering inflicted by humans on other humans, justified by twisted ideas of expediency, continues to be part of the dark side of human existence.

As we reflect on the events of Good Friday we should not minimise and sanitise the physical horror of Christ’s crucifixion yet, nor should we suggest that it was the worst ever kind of suffering. What it was and what it represents is the reality of human suffering deliberately inflicted. Man’s inhumanity to man. Not pain that is part of the human drive for survival, the kind of pain that might lead to new birth or new achievements, the pains of labour the sweat and toil of work. Nor the real and at times debilitating pain that arises out of the dislocation of the created world. No, this is pain inflicted to destroy; it is deliberately designed and consciously exacted. It is the pain inflicted by bullies, by oppressive regimes, by those who hold onto power through force rather than conciliation.

Jesus accepts this suffering, enduring the cross without reproach.

The folly of this, the confounding of wisdom, arises because this was not simply the killing of an innocent man, horrendous as that is. The folly is that Jesus was not just a human; the fullness of God was present, God incarnate, very God of Very God.

So, at some level we proclaim that God experienced not just the horror of the cross but the reality of death. It is this scandalous suggestion that Paul calls a ‘stumbling block’ to the Jews and ‘foolishness’ to the Gentiles. How can the Creator of all that is, the Almighty, Eternal, Being experience the very mortal finality of death? It makes no sense. It is both foolish and weak. Theologians and philosophers have struggled with this and continue to do so. Some want to see Jesus as simply an exemplar. We look to him as an example of how to live and how to die, an
example of patient, courageous suffering and forgiveness. Yet is that enough? There is also a danger in this position; it can end up glorifying suffering, as if the cross itself is the good news. Look how patiently Jesus suffered, go and do likewise, is not a healthy message for any of us.

If we believe in the incarnation then at some level God was on the cross. If this were not so then Jesus’ death would be just another brave man dying.

And if the fullness of God that was in Jesus experienced death, did that impact on the fullness of God present in the rest of the Trinity?

Some theologians have sought to emphasise both the utter sense of alienation of Jesus on the cross ‘My God my God why has thou forsaken me’ … and the utter sense of loss in the heart of God the father at this gulf. On the cross, God incarnate not only dies but in doing so experiences the estrangement from God that is part of the human condition. And God the father knows the loss of the beloved. We thus assume that in the Trinity there is a total experience of the most profound emotions, knowing that in saying that we are using human terms to express the inexpressible.

The saddest sound I have ever heard was a mother sobbing for her dead son as we laid him in the grave. His father was Jamaican and the custom is for all the men to fill in the grave, usually the women sing hymns while this happens, but everyone was so grief stricken at the death of this little boy that they were silent. All we could hear was the earth falling on the coffin and the howling grief of a mother who had lost her only child.

Thus, in the reality of the cross we find God somehow experiencing the abandonment of death and the deepest of pain, that is, the loss of the beloved. Humanities deepest fears and pain become recognised and held within God’s very being and because of this they are redeemed.

Now we can trust that God understands us, as the hymn writer Timothy Rees puts it.

\[
\text{And when human hearts are breaking} \\
\text{under sorrows iron rod,} \\
\text{then they find that selfsame aching} \\
\text{deep within the heart of God.}
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What the early church came to believe and what they have handed down to us, is the insistence that this death was real and its reality changed eternity. Somehow the worst that could happen to a human, the utter annihilation of life, had been absorbed into God and remade in the wonder of Resurrection. The evil of human violence and torture, transformed by divine love.

Those who gathered at the cross on the first Good Friday came with different hopes. Some of his friends, his mother, came hoping against hope for a miracle. Just as so many of us hope and pray while we watch our loved ones suffering.

Some came hoping for a spectacle. ‘Save yourself’ they cry, not expecting much but willing to be surprised.

Some came to gain a form of ghoulish pleasure from watching another suffer; it somehow boosts
their sense of righteousness. There is a dark desire to watch the fall of someone who had seemed so popular. Some were there just doing their job. Somebody has to do it and the more you do it the more hardened you become, not allowing yourself to think of the humanity of these individuals. Allowing their sentence to dehumanise them. And Jesus does not save himself; the miracle does not happen at this point. Jesus dies. Instead the miracle comes through this death and beyond, when the dead body of Jesus becomes the risen body of Christ. We believe that something did happen and it was so much more than a spectacle. Jesus didn’t save himself, he saved the thief by his side, the weeping women, the fearful disciples, the forgiven torturers, the ones who stood and jeered, and he saved us and all humanity. This is what inspired the early church that death was defeated, that darkness could be transformed into light, that love has triumphed. As David Jenkins former Bishop of Durham used to say ‘There is nothing in human life that is so low that God in Christ cannot stoop down to it.’ On the cross Jesus took our greatest fears, pain, alienation, death into the aching heart of the Godhead. It looks to the wisdom of the philosophers, to the worldly wise, as an illogical impossible foolish claim. But because Jesus did this we are made at one with him and at one with God. At-oned, as Julian of Norwich so beautifully puts it, atoned. This is our salvation. This is our hope. Our promise of transformation for us all. 4 years ago I walked through the valley of the shadow of death with my brother. He lived in our home for the last months of his life as the cancer reduced his freedom, eating at his body and brain with painful relentlessness. He had patiently endured the aggressive treatments. He had enjoyed the time bought by these, despite all the complications that came with them. He had longed for life. Now we faced the inevitable. The end when it came was peaceful, and so very sad, he was only 49. Yet, we walked this journey in faith. Our prayers did not lessen the pain he endured, our faith did not reduce the sense of loss and the sadness that such a good man had died so young but it did aid our parting as we firmly believed that death is not an end, that beyond it is the eternal love of God, that in Christ we shall all be made alive. Christ Crucified is foolishness to so many of the worldly wise but to us the power of God and the promise of salvation. And so in faith and gratitude we dedicate ourselves to all that brings life until the time we will face death, trusting in Christ and find it to be the gate into everlasting life.

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.