

Sermon on Good Friday

In the Gospel reading we have followed the passion of Christ through the eyes of John's Gospel chapters 18 & 19.

In my sermon I would like to try to add to the unfolding of the story by contributing some meditations and brief reflections on this long passage.

**Please, remember the arrest and trial before Annas: (18:1-24)
Jesus, knowing all that was coming upon him, went out to them.
This is the cup my Father has given me, shall I not drink it?**

Where is all the anguish and the wrestling in the Garden that the other gospels speak of so movingly?

You have to search for it in John...

It is there – this is the same Jesus -;

it is there, when earlier on he spoke about the grain of wheat that has to fall into the ground and die...

Then he said: **Now my soul is in turmoil, and what am I to say?**

Father, save me from this hour?

No, it was for this that I came.

Father, glorify your name.

John knows of the anguish of Jesus,

but as ever in his Gospel,

he wants to put all the emphasis on Jesus directing operations.

He doesn't ignore the pain –

the flogging and the thorns and the crucifying –

but he is making it clear that Jesus is not just a victim of circumstance, who happened to be caught up in pressures beyond his control and who faced death simply as a martyr.

He takes on the opposition

and had done so from the beginning,

healing and teaching, reaching out to the outcast and the strangers,

challenging the law when the law worked against

human needs and the requirements of love –

and refusing to be put off by threat or betrayal.

He could have escaped,

but he was not going to be intimidated away from his primary purpose of revealing God in all his glory.

The way and nature of Jesus,

the way of radical goodness and love,

is the way and nature of God himself.

And it is the way and nature of God

to confront and not to evade the powers of evil.

He went out to meet them –

this is the cup my Father has given me, shall I not drink it?
 The journey to the cross enters its final stage.
 Jesus walks towards his death
 with a banner of majestic love flying against the violence all around.

And then, imagine, please, the trial before Pilate: (18:28-40; 19:1-16)
It was the eve of Passover, about noon.

According to John, Jesus was crucified as the Passover lambs
 were being slaughtered in the temple;
 slaughtered in that sacrifice which declared
 that God had visited and redeemed his people:
 God and humanity joined by the life-blood of the sacrifice.
 The prophet wrote:
 he was wounded for our transgressions,
 bruised for our iniquities.
 He was oppressed and afflicted,
 yet he opened not his mouth.
 Like a lamb... and so on... we all know the words so well...
 That is the truth offered by the prophet...
 ...and Jesus is sentenced to death.

Remember his crucifixion and death: (19:31-42)
The soldiers took possession of his clothes:
the tunic was seamless.

If only we could cover the naked body of Jesus
 with that seamless robe and restore to him some kind of human dignity,
 some shield from the tormenting flies and the mocking gaze...
 Of course it would also protect us
 from having to see the blood of his wounds...
 Yet the blood is also covering his body –
 another seamless robe,
 produced by the piercing thorns and the scourge's lash and the tearing
 nails.
 Here we find the outward sign of God's total unbroken involvement in
 human life.
 In Jesus God became human in a love
 which is total even to the point of sharing pain and death.

Evil always seeks to divide and destroy;
 and the greatest division is between humankind and God.
 In the ancient story the sin of Adam and Eve
 made them hide from God in the garden,
 hide from the God who made them,
 loved them,

sought out their company...
 Evil which shows itself in human sin always divides people from one another;
 on Good Friday it can be seen
 in the simmering hatred between the Jews and Pilate in that trial scene...
 And this symbol of the Jew – Gentile divide in Jesus' days
 has its equivalent in every society throughout the history of humankind.
 It can be racism;
 it can be the horrors of ethnic cleansing of the past and of our own time...
 It can be discrimination and oppression in so many ways...
 And Jesus came to show that all people are God's beloved children.
 In God's kingdom no one will be outcast.
 No one will be deemed a foreigner –
 and no one specially privileged either –
 but all equally loved.
 When Jesus first stated that at the very beginning of his ministry
 the people tried to throw him off a precipice.
 And what the mob failed to do then in Nazareth
 the chief priests succeeded in doing in Jerusalem.

But it was a hollow victory;
 it was a defeat because it failed to do what evil ultimately intends to do:
 to cut humankind off from God.
 But God will not be cut off.
 Whatever people do to each other and thus to him,
 he will not abandon them,
 he will not turn away from his creation.
 So in the depth of agony –
 agony brought upon him because his love knew no bounds –
 he cried out as Luke tells us FATHER FORGIVE...
 ...in the depth of that agony
 he met the need of the penitent thief
 and of his own sorrowing mother.
 In death he cried IT IS ACCOMPLISHED –
 the seamless robe of his perfect love intact even in death...

Let us reflect on a last picture: (19:31-42)

Jesus is laid in the tomb.

With much relief we read the gentle and moving account of Jesus' burial:
 from the heat and pain and public mockery
 to the coolness of the garden tomb,
 to the soothing ointment and fresh linen,
 to the care of loving friends.

Joseph of Arimathea – a secret disciple for fear of the Jews...
 don't many of us identify with him sometimes?

Nicodemus – whom Jesus set thinking
in that night-time conversation all that time ago
now at his side...
the conversation bearing fruit...

According to ancient tradition
Jesus now goes to the place of departed spirits.
And his followers experience that there is nowhere
that men and women can go,
there is no condition and no circumstance they can get themselves into,
where his love cannot reach...
The seamless robe stretches to infinity...

When he returned to his world,
when that renewing recreating Sabbath was over,
he carried with him the marks of the cross.
The cross of suffering love is part of the eternal nature of God.
We are not abandoned,
he remains with his world – our world – in its suffering.
So now and at all times,
in the light of that love,
we can live our lives,
share our love
and pray our prayers.
Amen.