

Good Friday

Tonight we have taken St John's version of the Passion of Christ, and by the word 'passion' we mean, of course, his suffering. On Good Friday we think not just of the awful fact of his death on the Cross - a torture that would be enough for any person - but of the suffering, (physical, mental and spiritual), that Jesus experienced from the moment he was betrayed by one of his own into the hands of his enemies. I have always thought that the most terrible verse in the Bible is that which records Christ crying out from the Cross, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' Of course he was quoting a verse of a Psalm, but that does not take away from the fact that he felt for a moment utterly forsaken by his heavenly Father. If ever we needed to be assured that Jesus has experienced everything we go through, this is the verse.

To be betrayed by Judas Iscariot, one of his own disciples; to be manhandled, mocked and abused by the soldiers, clergy and authorities; to be cruelly executed by the slow, lingering means of crucifixion; to feel abandoned by God himself - all this is suffering of a high order, physically, emotionally and spiritually. And because God was in Christ, this tells us that God himself has experienced, and still experiences our own pain. It's easy to say to others, 'I feel your pain', when you don't really. But when we are going through our personal hell, God can genuinely say to us, 'I feel your pain', because he *has* felt our pain. We can talk of our 'lesser calvaries', because he was at Calvary. Richard Baxter in the 17thC wrote a marvellous hymn 'Lord, it belongs

not to my care'. One verse has these lines which bring us all comfort and hope:

*Christ leads me through no darker rooms
Than he went through before;
And who into God's kingdom comes
Must enter by this door.*

When people are suffering some awful tragedy, all too often I hear the accusation against God, 'How could a good God allow this to happen?' There is no neat, one-sentence answer to this, the greatest of all questions, but we can, and must, point people to the Cross, to God-in-Christ hanging there in agony because of the sin, evil and injustice of man. God has indeed felt our pain, and triumphed over it for us.

St John's account of Christ's passion records for us many dramatic sayings. 'My kingdom is not of this world', Jesus told Pontius Pilate. Pilate, the jobsworth administrator who only believed in what worked, famously asked the cynical question, 'What is truth?' 'Behold, the man' (*Ecce homo*), announced Pilate as he presented Jesus to the crowd rigged up in his mock kingly purple robe and crown of thorns. Jesus made seven statements from the Cross - the so-called 'Seven Last Words'. Three of them are recorded by John: 'Woman, behold thy son; son, behold thy mother' as Jesus entrusted his mother to the beloved disciple to look after her after his death; 'I thirst', and 'It is finished'. It is from John's Gospel that we learn that the soldiers were so surprised that Jesus had died so quickly that one of them pierced his side with a spear, just to make sure he was really dead. John tells us that blood and water suddenly flowed from his side.

Talleyrand was so wily a diplomat that he managed to be foreign minister not only to Napoleon but to his arch-enemy King Louis XVIII. He was so good at spin that he made Peter Mandelson look like a rank amateur. Nothing was ever what it seemed with Talleyrand. When he died in 1838, Metternich, the Austrian foreign minister, asked, 'What did he *mean* by that?' When tonight we gaze upon Jesus dying on the Cross of Calvary we must ask ourselves, 'What did he *mean* by that?'

So what *does* Christ's death mean? Was it just a tragic martyrdom as Jesus was finally outwitted by forces that got the better of him? Was his death the end of the great dream? Does death makes everything, as the Existentialists used to say, 'absurd'? Or does Christ's death actually have meaning? Does the fact that Jesus Christ, the Son of God himself, suffer pain, humiliation and death, actually *sanctify* our sorrows and make them significant? As the hymn, 'In the Cross of Christ I glory' says:

*Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure,
By the cross are sanctified;
Peace is there that knows no measure,
Joys that through all time abide.*

Certainly we have peace and even joy in the midst of our sufferings, because we live on this side of the Cross; we live each day now in the knowledge of Easter Resurrection, the triumph of God over sin, evil, injustice and death.

But does Christ's death mean more even than this? Traditionally we have always believed that 'Christ died for our sins'. But, again, what does that *mean*? He took the punishment for us? His death was somehow a sacrifice which satisfied the holy God, offended by our sin and guilt?

Whole libraries are filled with books as men and women over the centuries have wrestled with the meaning of Christ's death. Each of us must come to terms with Calvary, but countless people throughout the ages have found in the death of Jesus on the Cross not despair but hope, forgiveness, cleansing, healing, and new beginnings. And that is why we have always called it 'Good Friday'.

The Abp of Canterbury is due to give a radio talk today called 'What is the Point of Forgiveness?' Rowan Williams makes the excellent point that we must not forgive too easily. He says that it is not fair to expect victims of abuse, rape or torture to turn the other cheek with ease. I think he is entirely correct here. If your husband or wife cheats on you, it is not easy for you to forgive. It will cost you a lot. And actually, if you forgive your cheating partner easily and readily, it would seem that you weren't that bothered, or that you didn't have much of a moral sense yourself!

The Cross shews us that, although God, the merciful God, so much wants to forgive us and to make us at one with him again, it costs him. If God were to sweep the sin of the world under the carpet with a casual, 'Sure, forget about it, old chap. It doesn't matter', then he would shew himself as not very bothered and certainly as not very righteous or holy.

There is a cost to forgiveness. However big your heart and loving your nature, you would not easily forgive the man who abused your child or who cheated you out of your job. Christ in agony on the Cross tells us that it cost God to forgive us, for, as St Paul said, *God was in Christ*.