**Palm Sunday 20th March 2016**

**Matthew 27.11-54**

In a moment we will sing that moving hymn of Isaac Watts’ ‘When I survey the wondrous cross’. Why would he call an instrument of extreme torture ‘wondrous’. Where is the wonder in the execution of an innocent man? On Friday we will walk behind a cross. Why do we call that day Good? Are Christians just being perverse and sadistic in their revelling in the barbaric killing of their saviour?

As we start this Holy Week let us meditate on the events of that Good Friday and reflect on why we would dare to call the cross wondrous and label the day Jesus died as good.

**It is wondrous because Jesus died instead of us.**

The day began with Jesus brought before Pilate the Roman Governor. It was part of the strange fate of the moment that there should be, in prison in Jerusalem, a notorious rebel leader who also bore the name Jesus Pilate asks the crowd to choose, for their festival celebration, one of the Jesus’ to be released. Jesus the revolutionary who used violence and force, the macho no compromising go change the future popular hero also known as Barabbas? Or Jesus the revolutionary who told his followers to love their enemies, consider the lilies and keep on forgiving: also known as the alleged Christ?

It is a depressing feature of human nature and the collective democratic will of the people that in a fearful situation people choose who they believe is the ‘strong leader’, the one who talks tough and acts tough rather than the one who says do not be afraid, who talks about co-operation, love and respect and whose strength is of a different kind to violent force and actions. In the two great democratic decisions this year: the EU referendum and the US presidential election what choice will people make. Which Jesus will they vote for?

Matthew wants to make a point and he presses it home. Barabbas represents all of us. When Jesus dies, the rebel Jesus goes free, the sinners go free, we all go free. That, after all, is what the Passion story is all about. The crowd reject the way of peace and forgiveness, of loving your enemy and sharing with your neighbour. The innocent one dies.

The subtlety is lost on Pilate. The only subtle point he wanted to make in this was that he wasn’t guilty. It wasn’t his fault. When Pilate washes his hands, Matthew doesn’t think for a moment that he is any less guilty. He is the man who has not taken responsibility, who has looked for a convenient way out of the dilemma to save his own skin. He had several opportunities to make the right decision. His conscience told him Jesus was innocent; Roman law said an innocent man should not be put to death; his wife had a dream encouraging her husband to let Jesus go. But Pilate was afraid of the crowd and the religious authorities and wanted to save his reputation and position.

The point for Matthew is that all are guilty: the chief priests, the elders who have handed Jesus over; Pilate the weak bully; and the crowds.

We are all guilty. Who has not shared in the actions and motives on display by the protagonists on Good Friday. Who is innocent? Yet the innocent one gets crucified.

Jesus dies in the place of the sinner. The cross is wondrous because at this point of judgement, the one who created the world, the one who healed the lepers and made the blind see, who could have called down a legion of angels to rescue him and reap vengeance on those who wished him harm, chose not to. Even though the crowd chose the wrong Jesus, even though the crowd today continues to choose the wrong Jesus, the wrong saviour, the wondrous cross reassures us that Jesus was prepared to die instead of us. Our guilt and shame will not be crucified in the judgement of God.

**Secondly the cross is wondrous because Jesus overcame evil with good.**

The soldiers mock Jesus, dressing him up as a king and pretending to salute him and bow down before him. They had been fighting what today we would call terrorists – Jewish rebels against Rome, desperate for liberty, ready to do anything. The Roman soldiers had probably seen some of their friends killed. They were tired of policing such a place far away from their homes, having to keep the lid on a volatile and dangerous situation with all kinds of rebel groups ready to riot.

Now here was someone who’d been accused of trying to make himself the ‘king of the Jews’. He was going to die within hours. Why not have a bit of fun at his expense? Why not tease him, beat him up, and show him what the Romans think of other people’s kings? Let him know that someone else is in fact the boss. Use him to pay back all the insults and violence you’ve had done to you in this ‘god forsaken corner of the Empire.

It still happens in those god forsaken jobs: nurses abusing those in their care, prison officers taking out their frustrations on prisoners, soldiers torturing those who have been making their lives hell. No matter how many safeguards and millions are spent on public enquiries, it will keep on happening.

Jesus is enthroned as it were on a cross with the title of King of kings. He is a different king and he conqours through love. He defeats evil by taking the evil of the world, the hatred and cruelty and unthinking mockery of the world, the gratuitous violence, bullying torture that still defaces the world, and letting it do its worst to him.

Never let it be said that Christianity is an airy fairy faith, all about having wonderful inner, spiritual experiences, and not about the real world. This story takes us to the very heart of what Christianity is all about; and here we meet, close up and raw, the anger and bitterness of the world, doing its worst against one who embodies and represents the love of the creator God himself.

On the wondrous cross Jesus overcomes evil with the force of love.

Do we look at the cross and the powerlessness of Jesus as an example of God’s impotence or as proof of God’s love? The Romans, bred on power deities like Mars and Jupiter, could recognise little godlikeness in a crumpled corpse hanging on a tree. Devout Jews, bred on a powerful warrior God, saw little to be admired in this god who died in weakness and shame. The cross was a stumbling block and a decisive case against seeing Jesus as the Messiah – crucifixion had fulfilled the curse of the law. Yet the cross has changed the moral and spiritual landscape of the world.

Scott Peck a Christian psychologist writes,

*‘I cannot be any more specific about the methodology of love than to quote these words of an old priest who spent many years in battle: ‘there are dozens of ways to deal with evil and several ways to conquer it. All of them are facets of the truth that the only ultimate way to conquer evil is to let it be smothered within a willing, living human being. When it is absorbed there like blood in a sponge or a spear in to one’s heart, it loses its power and goes no further.’*

*The healing of evil – scientifically or otherwise – can be accomplished only by the love of individuals. A willing sacrifice is required. I do not know how this occurs. But I know that it does… Whenever this happens there is a slight shift in the balance of power in the world.’[[1]](#footnote-1)*

The balance of power shifted more than slightly that day on Calvary because of who it was who absorbed the evil. If Jesus of Nazareth had been one more innocent victim – like a Martin Luther King or a Ghandi, he would have left his mark in history and faded from the scene. No religion would have sprung up around him. What changed history was the disciples dawning awareness (it took the resurrection to convince them) that God himself had chosen the way of weakness. The cross redefines God as one who was willing to relinquish power and judgement and wrath for the sake of love. Power, no matter how well intentioned, tends to cause suffering. Love, being vulnerable, absorbs it. In a point of convergence on a hill called Calvary, God renounced one for the sake of the other.

On the wondrous cross Jesus overcomes evil with the force of love.

Thirdly the cross is wondrous because Jesus dies our death. Death is the great enemy and the ultimate challenge we all must one day face. Jesus has gone before us.

But don’t think for one moment that this was easy nor that it wasn’t costly. As Jesus hangs on the cross he cries out, in the opening words of Psalm 22 asking why God has abandoned him.

No theologian can adequately explain the nature of what took place within the trinity on that day at Calvary.

We have been studying the psalms for our Lent Course and Jesus’ cry from the cross comes firmly within Israel’s tradition of righteous sufferers who, on the basis of their faith foundation, question God.

This kind of honesty is all very well for the psalmists we may say, but we’d expect more from the Son of God! We don’t expect to hear the Son of God saying ‘my God, my God why have you forsaken me?’ that sounds like something we would say. For him to have said something like that would mean that he is human like us.

Many people have trouble embracing Jesus’ full humanity – perhaps because humanity is simply difficult to embrace, within ourselves or within others. The human condition is so untidy, both emotionally and physically. We feel awkward when we discover the humanity of those we know. A confused moment, an ill chosen word, a disorganized life. We are unsettled that we have discovered their imperfection. Perhaps they don’t have absolute power or control after all.

We are uncomfortable confronting the raw emotions that are part of what makes us human. We want the brave face, with only implied pain in the background. We don’t want to be there to see our recently widowed friend’s shoulder’s shaking with sobs at midnight. We want to hear her say instead, ‘I’m coping pretty well with all of this, thanks’. We don’t want to see the defeated Olympic athlete with his head in his hands, pulling on his hair and bemoaning his failed dream. We want a perky one liner at the microphone about how ‘there’s always next time’.

As human beings, like the psalmists, we struggle with the apparent absence of God when we need God most. So did Jesus. At times we assume that if we do not feel God’s presence, God is not present. So did Jesus. The irony of Jesus’ question in Matthew is that in that very situation that seems to negate all faith, God had never been closer: ‘In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself’ as Paul put it in 2 Cor 5.;19.

In his anguished, very human cry from the cross, Jesus puts his own teachings to the test. ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who know their need of God, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven’. The resurrection is God’s answer to Jesus cry from the cross, the divine response to Good Friday. Jesus’ struggle to be obedient to the point of death, which we observe at Gethsemane, is honoured by God. The righteous one is vindicated. The resurrection is the lens through which disciples then and now view the cross. Only with the resurrection can we understand Jesus’ death, as a triumph rather than a tragedy: as something Good.

There is a gospel of despair: ‘I’ll never be able to get over it’ ‘this has ruined my life’ ‘there is no hope’ as if people talk about things and situations that God has no power or authority over. The reverse is a trite gospel of triumphalism ‘it will be alright’ ‘God will look after you’ ‘it will all turn out for the best’.

We have instead a gospel of redemption that takes the bad and seeks the good, embraces the pain and trusts in love. We have a gospel that goes through the agony and pain of Good Friday and doesn’t avoid it nor deny it. But then there is Easter Sunday. Here is the double edged gospel truth: You don’t have one without the other.

It is a wondrous cross because Jesus died our death.

**Finally it is a wondrous cross because nothing can separate us from the love of God.**

All our contempt and pride, our deceit and failure is addressed there in cruel honesty. And the truth about ourselves will ultimately set us free. It is a wondrous cross because God in Christ absorbed the hurt and pain, the evil and even death itself within the blood of Jesus. It is a wondrous cross because it is not the end of the story. Love wins out. Hope triumphs over despair. Grace flows.

A curtain in the temple symbolising the separation of God from sinful humanity is torn open. If humanity can crucify the Son of God and God still does not reject us but instead throws open the curtain: then nothing can separate us from the love of God.

It is a wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died. Love so amazing so divine demands my soul, my life, my all.

1. Quotation extracted from the book "The Jesus I never knew" written by Philip Yancey (pg.204). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)