

Good Friday Homily 2 April 2021

May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world (Galatians 6.14).

Words of St Paul, not mine, but already am I boasting to say I have never preached on Good Friday; will the temptation be to throw everything at it in a boastful, show-off kind of way? Surely the majestic Passion Narrative we have just heard and participated in says it all better than any sermon. Yet if the cross and passion of our Lord Jesus Christ are not preached on Good Friday, then when do they hold centre stage?

Well, this past year they may have been right there in the heart of things, whether acknowledged as such or instead hidden and veiled to many. If any of you watched Bishop Richard's weekly homilies last Eastertide you will recall how he repeatedly characterised Christ's way of self-sacrificial love as being the truth at the heart of the universe. It was easy to see and celebrate that truth as we clapped for the NHS, carers and key-workers, those who put the needs of others before their own; whose vocation was to care; who risked their lives to save lives and in, some cases, gave them. Jesus Christ, the crucified one, the servant of all, the firstborn from the dead, may very well have been veiled within his brothers and sisters made in His image; not consciously proclaimed by those of several different faiths or of none, but manifested through their countless generous acts. And with the eyes of Christian faith, surely we have seen suffering, sickness, sorrow and death and have seen Jesus there; have seen His presence to hallow and consecrate and to give the assurance of hope in resurrection.

Yet here, faced with the reality of such suffering and with the range of worldviews, could the Church be accused of a kind of boasting: co-opting the pain of others in the service of our message? offering glib meaning against such lived experience of loss? claiming that our metanarrative is the key to unlock all meaning? And, moreover, did it need the coronavirus pandemic for us to proclaim Christ crucified? Did it need all this suffering for us to be returned to the heart of our faith – the suffering, death and resurrection of the Son of Man and Son of God? Let us really not boast if this is the case.

Perhaps, then, if it has taken this crisis to put the cross and passion at centre stage; perhaps we and the world were not crucified one to another? Have we been happily carried along by prevailing cultural currents? Were we content to acquiesce in the degradation of the creation? Have we stood by blindly and silently in the face of racism? Have we neglected the cry of the poor, held within our own comfort, ease and prosperity?

This is what lies behind Paul's stark language: our own comfort, our self-interest, our colluding with the powers of this world; these are all idols taking the place of the true occupant of the throne – the crucified one, of the same flesh and blood as suffering humanity; the one true sacrifice which avails for all time, people, places; the work of love which completely re-orientates our lives, our goals, our labours and which demands our souls, our lives, our all.

Yes, let any boasting consist in this before the limitless love of Christ: that we are His, His alone. So let us turn this Good Friday to that wondrous cross, in the full and heartfelt words of Isaac Watts' beloved hymn:

When I survey the wondrous cross
on which the Prince of glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast
save in the death of Christ, my God!
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his blood.

See, from his head, his hands, his feet,
sorrow and love flow mingled down.
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were a present far too small.
Love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.

Mark Eminson