

Sermon Notes: Good Friday 2010

Isaiah 52:13-53:12; John 18:1-19:42

Good Friday is the most sacred of days in our Christian calendar. It is one of pilgrimage feasts, one of the few left, a day when we gather as followers of Jesus to not only commemorate that saving event some two thousand years ago but also to stand before the cross as the passion story is read. We stand there remembering but more importantly repenting. Moved by the story we are called upon to amend our lives, to repent and to commit ourselves to living differently. Without this effort on our part Easter will come and go with little real meaning beyond a date in our calendar.

There are lots of lenses through which we can view the passion of Christ and I would like to invite all of us to pause and reflect upon from the perspective with which we view our Saviour as he dies on the cross. A useful way of doing this is through the eyes of the those who were there on that first Good Friday.

The first group of course is the crowds. How easy it is for us to stand with these people. Their approach to faith can be very appealing. These are the ones who had followed Jesus throughout his ministry, who had brought their sick to him for healing. These are the ones who rejoiced and delighted in seeing the deaf hearing again, the lame walking, the blind gaining their sight back, the dead raised to life and demons being sent packing. The crowd is made up of those who understood he taught with authority, that he showed compassion and love to the poor and the marginalized and offered dignity, healing and fresh beginnings to those who had fallen on tough and sinful times. They loved Jesus a love that was shown at his entry into Jerusalem to celebrate the festival of the Passover.

That was just a few short days ago. On that day they sang and danced, sang “alleluia” and gave praise and thanks to God on high. Now they are screaming for his blood. They seek the release of a terrorist and a murderer rather than the release of the innocent Jesus. Why the change? And why such a massive change?

The way the story is written it would seem that these people were happy to follow Jesus because they were not being pushed further than they were prepared to commit themselves. Now, in Jesus, they are forced to face up to an unpalatable truth: God wants a whole way of life and not just a faith of convenience. What they wanted was a religious way of life that fitted in with their lifestyles, with what they already believed and one that did not expose them too much to their sins and failings. They were after a comfortable religion of ritual, Jesus was after the transformation of the whole of creation, an end to injustice and the inclusion of all men, saints and sinners in his Father’s Kingdom. That was too much for the crowd. Jesus had let them down. He did not meet their expectations. He would not do as he was told and now he had the audacity to enter Jerusalem as its messiah. That they were not prepared to accept. It was not in their script and so they mocked him, abused him and demanded his death. With Jesus gone, they were free to get on with their old time religion of comfort once again. Are there times when we find ourselves standing with them?

Who else was there? With what other group might we be standing? That’s right, the priests and the leaders of the Jewish people were there in numbers insisting that this thing they were doing was something God wanted and was for the sake of the whole People of God. They were able to justify the death of an innocent man, convincing people to lie, to give warped slants on what Jesus had said and done all for the sake of protecting their own positions of power and privilege. Yes, in many ways this is all about power. In Jesus the sinners were able to find a direct way back to God, had their sins forgiven and were incorporated into God’s Kingdom. They were part of the family of God, not on account of their saintly lives but because of their union in Christ.

The poor old priests and lawyers felt badly left out. They were left wondering just where they now stood in this Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus. If they were to allow Jesus to continue preaching, teaching and healing, then they were concerned that Judaism would change forever and that the changes would be for the worst. Are there times when we might find ourselves standing at Golgotha with them?

It is amazing just how such holy men could go about rationalizing the most outrageous of behaviours. While they would not admit it, they were prepared to put Jesus to death because he asked too much of them. Had he been a more compromising messiah they might have been able to accommodate him in their plans but God had

not sent him to become man to fit in with an agenda already drawn up for him by those who should have known better. It was inevitable that they would seek to put him to death and it is instructive to follow the process of their isolation and marginalisation. It began when he preached in the synagogue (Luke 4) and it ended with their rejoicing in the crucifixion. Such blindness. Such hypocrisy. Such self serving and arrogance, all in the name of religious purity.

How easy it is to stand with the priests and lawyers, the leaders of the Jews. We can hold onto our passivity and to our particular stance on the Church because we are acting for the good of the Church. It is worrying to think that our faithfulness to what we hold dear in our religious traditions might well be a way of thinking the crucifies our Saviour in the world today. That instead of proclaiming Jesus and bringing him alive in the lives of others, we are actually burying him in the tomb.

And then there were the soldiers. At least they are quite up front. They were just carrying out their orders. Here was a prisoner condemned to death and so they carried out the sentence. No real blame can go to them. They were men of their times. But I suspect that the Gospels ask us to see if in them we can find something of ourselves. Can we sit quietly listening to the passion and accept that we too are there with the soldiers banging nails into our saviour's arms? It is, as the hymn goes, *our sins which nailed him there. On the cross*. How easily we can seek to demonise those soldiers and yet ignore our own guilt, pretending that while they are directly responsible for his death we are guilty only marginally, at a distance. How convenient that is.

Today forces us to face up to the Gospel truth that Jesus was nailed to the cross for our sins and by our sins. We are guilty of the death of that innocent man and each and every time we sin we once more hammer those nails into his flesh. Each time we fail to love, to forgive, to reach out, to welcome, we are there with our hammers and nails. Every time we judge another, abuse another and fail to live up to the demands of Jesus we join with those brutal Roman soldiers and crucify God's son. There is simply no escaping it and part of today is understanding that when we sin we stand there with the soldiers on this day.

And there, a little away from the action on Golgotha stand the disciples. This truly is the most worrying group for it is the one group with which we can all so readily align ourselves. They, like us are professed followers. Yet where are they when the going gets really difficult for Jesus? They stand off in the distance, there with him but not so close that someone might recognise them and associate them with that man on the cross. That would not be good. That might lead to their own deaths!

Here we have discipleship at its worst. A preparedness to follow Jesus but a willingness to put a price on that following. "Yes, we will follow you Lord, but.....". It is that but that creates the problem for discipleship.

What Jesus demands is a life of discipleship, a faith that permeates every part of our lives and everything we do, think and say. He is talking about membership in a Kingdom that is an absolute Kingdom and we either live in it or we do not live in it. Discipleship is not something we can slip into and out of when it suits us. It is all too easy to stand with those disciples at the foot of the hill of Golgotha. Going to the top can simply ask too much and anyway, no one wants a religious fanatic. For those disciples, following Jesus was something to be taken in moderation and that first Good Friday was expecting them to go too far. It is better to stand off a little and move in and out of discipleship when it is convenient, not too demanding and when the risks are minimal.

Finally, there is Mary, the mother of the Lord. How I wish I could stand at Golgotha this day as she did. If I was her and it was my son on the cross, I would be angry, I would be trying to drag him down, attacking the soldiers and having to be vigorously restrained. But we get none of that in the Gospel accounts. It is a very different Mary. There is no talk of revenge, no violence, no anger, just a profound sorrow.

The way the story is told we see a Mary who approaches the death of her Son in the same attitude of faith with which she approached his conception: *Let it be done unto me according to your will*. How hard it is to stand there with Mary when that is the level of faith and commitment that is required. When we are struggling the position of the crowd, the priests, the soldiers and the disciples looks much more attractive. Believing in God in all things and through all things is a tough ask. To look at her son hanging there and trusting that in God all

would be well is a truly amazing approach to life. To see the possibility of life in the midst of death is the kind of discipleship that is required and is the discipleship that is modelled by Mary our mother.

And so here we are. Left with the question: *Where do we stand at Golgotha today? With which group?* It is not just remembering the crucified Christ. We have to respond to the invitation that is his death. It is a call, a vocation in which we are invited to leave behind a way of living that cannot bring lasting life, peace and joy. That cross is a reminder that we are called upon to turn from our sins, a reminder that we in fact are sinners in need of forgiveness. If we leave today unchanged, without a clear resolve to seek to live differently, without a burning desire to right the wrongs in our lives, then we have missed the point of Easter. Forgiveness is ours and the new life that comes with it, if only we dare to repent and believe.