

Good Friday Homily for Churches Together in Mottingham

Delivered at Mottingham Methodist Church

A unique spiritual fact lies at the heart of the Christian faith: the loving and self-sacrificial death of God incarnate as a human being. Some of the prophets, especially Isaiah, had an inkling of this, with their vision of the Messiah to come as a suffering servant. They could not, however, come to a full realisation of the awful and wonderful mystery that is both the foundation and cornerstone of the Christian faith. John's Gospel reports the bleak and terrible fact of Christ's execution with the following stark words: "They crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them." (John 19.18) A simple plain reporting of the act that changed the direction of human history forever.

Jesus was not simply an innocent victim of a miscarriage of human justice. Nor was he just a man misunderstood, because his teaching was way ahead of its time. Many such teachers and prophets have died, both before and since Jesus came. Jesus's death was completely different, because he was, Christians believe, the unique Son of God. Even so, he was forced to suffer the most extreme, cruel and shameful Roman death penalty, and to be numbered with the most degraded criminals. In his darkest hour, Jesus sank to the absolute nadir of human suffering. Yet, incredibly, this was the means used by God to open the way to new light, life and hope for all humanity, for we all know the glorious end to the story on that first Easter morning.

Uniquely in John's Gospel, the degradation of the cross and the glory of God in Christ are brought together in a very special way. John 3 paves the way for this: "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him, may have eternal life". (John 3:14) Just as the Israelites in the wilderness were saved from death by serpent bites by gazing upon the image of a bronze serpent held aloft for them by Moses (a kind of homeopathic remedy), so Jesus's death on the cross gives eternal life and freedom from spiritual death to all who find the grace to believe in the salvation he offers.

As the eminent New Testament scholar, Paula Gooder, points out, the 'lifting up' of Jesus could refer to his crucifixion certainly, but it also points to his resurrection and Ascension, and in a wonderful way, it might be regarded as being all three at the same time - ignominy and glory become inextricably bound together. We might recall that when Judas leaves the upper room where the Last Supper took place in order to betray his master, Jesus declares: "now the time has come for the Son to be glorified". From the disciples' point of view this initially must have seemed a strange and incongruous thing for Jesus to have said, given the terrible events that were to unfold in the coming hours; however, in John's Gospel, Jesus's passion (his death on the cross), is identified as being an aspect of his glory, and not simply as a cruel and horrific execution. Indeed, we might say that the cross and the resurrection are brought so closely together, that they are almost seen as one. This is heartening for us on this day, of all days.

For along with all the sickening and heart-rending events – the betrayal, the arrest, the mockery, the scourging and vile execution – we have the full assurance that there is also glory: the glory of salvation and of rising again. However dark life gets, there is always hope. This is especially manifest in the historical fact that the Roman Empire, which was for some 300 years a centre of cruel persecution for Christians, became the heart and centre of

the Christian faith. The cross became transformed into glorious icon of salvation, held up before the eyes of the world.

Strangely, wonderfully, Jesus's arms outstretched so cruelly, form also a gesture of embrace for the whole world and for all human history. Jesus offers forgiveness of sins and eternal life to all who find the ability to accept his loving gift of Himself in accord with his heavenly Father's purposes. What Abraham could not do, and was not ultimately required to do – sacrifice his son out of love and devotion to God – God Himself does for all of us. He gives his Son out of love, so that all who find the grace to believe in Christ may enjoy once more a full and restored relationship with God. This is good news indeed, a tale of great glory and a cause for jubilation.

Yet today we withhold the fullness of celebration, because the cross of Good Friday reminds us so powerfully of the depth of human cruelty and wickedness. Good Friday speaks in stark and uncompromising terms of humanity's need for forgiveness, healing and redemption. When we behold the cross, we are reminded of our own brokenness and sinfulness; of tragic human divisions and conflicts in the wider world, our own nation, and indeed in the church itself. These divisions cannot but be a cause for shame when we consider Jesus's ultimate act of self-giving love; when we recall his one sufficient sacrifice for all who turn to Him.

So as we meditate on Christ's loving gift of Himself, we pray also that we may strengthen our resolve to live lives more worthy of the sacrifice he has made for us; lives more worthy of the love he has poured out for us with his very life blood. In making such a resolve we become, in some small measure, partakers in our Lord's glory, for this resolve transforms the way we relate to our human sisters and brothers. Furthermore, in reflecting on St John's theme of Christ's glory, we call to mind that this glory makes death and resurrection two sides of the same coin: that Jesus is the Saviour who brings hope and joy out of darkness and death.

With all blessings for Good Friday and the coming Easter Season.

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