

Good Friday reflection – 10th April 2020

Readings: Isaiah 52.13-end 53; Hebrews 10.16-25; John 18 and 19

The backdrop to this year's Good Friday is very strange. Unlike previous Holy Weeks, we have been unable physically to gather to journey together to this point where we stand before the cross, as we do today. We have had to make that journey as the dispersed rather than the gathered church. Perhaps today, as we reflect on how the disciples scattered and left Jesus alone to face the final and greatest confrontation with the forces of darkness and death, nailed to a cross, that sense of the strangeness of everything is particularly appropriate.

Last night, we remembered the last meal that Jesus shared with his friends. During that meal, Jesus took the symbols of Israel's ancient Passover meal and reinterpreted them in relation to himself. His was the body that was shortly to be broken, and his was the blood that was to shortly be shed, so that the sins of the world could be forgiven and creation redeemed. After that meal, Jesus and his disciples went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. There, Jesus grappled with the agonizing reality of the ultimate test that was about to come his way. And there he made his final decision to surrender his life, and to trust that God's purposes would be fulfilled through his self-giving love.

In stark contrast to Jesus's steadfast commitment and self-giving love, within hours most of his friends and followers, including the very closest ones, had abandoned him, or even denied that they knew him at all. This contrast between Jesus and his failed friends is instructive for us. Moments of crisis have a way of revealing our true character. The decisions we make, and the way we behave in these times demonstrate what we truly believe and value. And so let's allow this contrast between Jesus's faithfulness, demonstrated in the decisions he made and the way he behaved throughout these last hours of his life, and the failure of his friends at the same time to offer us a mirror for honest self-reflection, against the current backdrop of uncertainty, anxiety and stress brought about by the current coronavirus pandemic. What are my choices in this crisis revealing right now about what I truly believe and value?

Such honest self-reflection is hard work, and can reveal painful truths about ourselves. But remember that the disciples' many failures all go to highlight and emphasise the steadfast, faithful, committed love of Jesus. In

other words, it is when we are honest about our own shortcomings and failures that we discover new depths to the mercy and generosity of Jesus.

After his arrest, Jesus is put on trial, firstly by the leaders of his own religious tradition, and then in front of the might of the Roman empire. He is caught in the web of power games between Jerusalem and Rome. The Jerusalem Temple, and the Roman court, were some of the oldest and most sophisticated human institutions of Jesus's day. And yet they utterly fail to carry out justice. The innocent Jesus, called Christ, is condemned to death, and the guilty Jesus, called Barabbas, is set free. By contrast to these human systems, Jesus, from the court room to the cross, offers compassion to mercy to all who surround him. The social systems created by humans are infected with the human condition. They magnify human selfishness, and this failure and infection is exposed pitilessly as the story unfolds. But in Jesus, we see exposed the true heart of God – in his words of compassion and love extended to the criminal crucified at his side; to his mother and disciple; even to the soldiers as they are nailing him to the cross. As Jesus hangs on the cross, God's love is revealed in human form – and Jesus succeeds where even the brightest and most honourable of human institutions totally fail. On Good Friday, when we stand before the cross, and see the full extent of God's self-giving love for creation revealed, all we can do is bow our heads in sorrow for our failures, grief for our part in bringing Jesus to this place, and amazement and gratitude that he should do this for us.

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 me 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 an offering far too small
Love so amazing, so divine
Demands my soul, my life, my all