

Good Friday 2017

Today we experience again the meeting point between three things:

Jesus' experience of the passion as we encounter it in the passion narratives of the gospels,
the affirmations of Christian theology about the meaning and impact of Jesus' death that are found in hymnody and liturgy and in our religious consciousness
and our personal convictions of being saved or set free by the death of Christ.

The narrative of Jesus' passion, in the first instance, comes straight out of the politics, economics and social-religious arrangements of the time. When we did the dramatic reading of Mark's Passion last Sunday we listened specifically to different voices speaking, the religious authorities, the civic authorities and the people. And just as we can observe the interplay of powers and interests as we re-read the story, and they were in John's version again in today's passion gospel, so we can imagine Jesus being all too aware of the realities of his environment in first century Judea. He exercised most of his ministry knowing that John the Baptist had perished at the hands of Herod, because he had dared to criticise him. He was aware too of the ferocity of Roman power, that it could liquidate whole villages at a strike and arrange multiple crucifixions of insurgents on the say-so of the governor. Contrary to how he is portrayed in the gospels, Pilate was known for his merciless actions. With all this in mind, it is likely that when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday, in a modest demonstration, he knew he was taking a risk – perhaps a big risk at that. In so far as he then went straight to the temple to press his case and take on the religious authorities, there is a case to say that he even provoked the reaction he got – namely the actions of the temple police to first try and silence him and then hand him over to be tried on a capital charge. It was a very small step for the Roman authorities to then choose to eliminate him.... This story however, even though it stands alone as an account of how imperial power crushes a troublemaker, is of course *far more to us than a narrative of isolated historical events*. And this is because we read into it a divine purpose – and not only that, but a divine purpose for the salvation of humanity and

creation. And this has been so from very early on. Among the first to declare Jesus' death to be theologically and spiritually transformative were the gospel writers. They portray Jesus going to his death not just 'knowingly', because of the circumstances we have identified, but because it is an act of obedience to the Father. Critically, the gospels portray Jesus' death as belonging to the will of God. In Matthew, Mark and Luke in the agony of the garden Jesus wrestles with accepting a destiny he hasn't chosen, but must embrace. "Take this cup from me", he cries, "but not my will, but yours be done". Paul expresses the same sense of divine purpose, memorably, in the reading we had on Palm Sunday from Philippians 2, saying that because of Jesus' obedience to the point of death, even death on a cross, so God achieved something groundbreaking, "therefore God highly exalted him!"... And in the gospel of John, we get an even stronger sense of divine intentionality. Ch 12 v.27 reads, "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say, 'Father save me from this hour? No, *it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.* Father glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it and I will glorify it again.'" Out of this high theology of the cross comes the affirmation from Jesus four verses later, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die." God is at work in this death and dying for good, for humanity and creation! We do not have to look far at all to find the earliest Christian writings reflecting a fundamental conviction that this death is from God, it is profoundly meaningful, and most of all, it is a saving death, acting for the salvation of humanity and creation.... It sounds even prosaic to make this point, because for most of the time we do not actually countenance any other interpretation of the facts of the story! Theology and conviction took over long ago. The reason I make the point, however, is that still, when we rehearse the passion story every year, and we immerse ourselves in the liturgy and hymnody of this week, we revisit the captivating, inspiring, transformative character and composition of the events of Jesus' passion. *We find ourselves right at that vortex where story and theology and conviction collide.* And sometimes I think it is useful to stand back and recognise that what happened in the tradition – the conversion of a would-be mundane story into a theologically laden, spiritually transformative narrative – is actually something that goes on in us as individual believers too. We too, in ourselves, over time, as we appropriate the deep messages of salvation that come to us through the passion, are quietly making sense of how a historical story has morphed into something quite other, something quite

wonderful, releasing, liberating, transforming – because it is our story! And so we sing with joyful abandon, “It is a thing most wonderful, almost too wonderful to be, that God’s own Son should come from heaven and die to save a child like me;” and we sing this with joy because we have found it to be true, for us and within us. And we have appropriated the story to such an extent that we are bold to say, that not only was this the divine intention, but Jesus was sent for this purpose. And so it is that every Good Friday *it is this mystery of salvation through the death of Christ*, which comes to us out of a story in time, that we receive again collectively, individually and joyfully.

In the passion story there are particular themes or motifs or theological proposals that grab/grip us. One is the sense that many of us carry that ‘Christ died for us or for me’. “There is a green hill far away, outside the city wall, where the dear Lord was crucified who died to save us all;... and we believe *it was for us* he hung and suffered there;... he died that *we might be forgiven, he died to make us* good that we might go at last to heaven saved by his precious blood;... there was no other good enough to *pay the price of sin*, he only could unlock the gate of heaven, and let us in.” These extracts draw heavily on a particular theology, the ‘substitutionary’ theory of the atonement – the atonement being how the death of Jesus makes us at-one with God. Sin has separated us from God, only a sacrifice can take that sin away or erase it and clear the way back, (another take is that only a sacrifice can appease the wrath of God that is rightly directed at us); either way it is Jesus who pays the price that should really fall on us for our sinfulness and wayward living. Jesus goes to his death, for us and instead of us, he pays the price of our sin, and so his death allows God to forgive us. Therefore, he dies to make us good – to save us, to pave the way to heaven. This is a powerful spiritual transaction and many of us will feel deeply moved that Jesus’ death has achieved a freedom that we could otherwise simply not access. In our first hymn we sang of this, that “there in the garden *my heavy load he chose to bear*,” and, he “gave his life that we might live.” It is through Jesus’ death that God opens a way back into the divine embrace. Some, however, may find this angle unsatisfying. For some it amounts to a sanction for failure to take responsibility for human actions and sin – that if the consequence of human sin falls on Jesus, we need pay little attention to what is wrong either in us or in the world. Yet notwithstanding any objections, a

deep vein of saving grace lives within this theological construction of the death of Jesus and it brings peace and empowerment to many of us.

Another motif of the passion is the affirmation that Jesus' confrontation with evil won a great victory, the victory of the cross, which is validated and crowned by the resurrection. On Passion Sunday we prayed in the collect, "Most merciful God, who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ delivered and saved the world: grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross *we may triumph in the power of his victory.*" And what victory is this we might ask? It is the victory of suffering love over every form and disguise of evil that is levelled against it. In Jesus' holy week we witness the full force of all that is evil in human affairs and human relations conspiring to crush the one who stands out against it. And Jesus does not escape. The week culminates in his execution. And yet faith declares that what we witness is actually *a great victory*: a victory of love over evil, a victory that empowers us to follow in his way of suffering love, for what we learn, crucially, is that love and self-sacrifice will always, ultimately triumph, notwithstanding appearances to the contrary, or setbacks, or disappointments. We might wonder how Syrian Christians are hearing this message this week as state and terrorist violence pounds their homes and streets. And it is notable that the former archbishop George Carey has protested this week that Syrian Christians are very poorly represented among Syrians who have been granted permission to leave their country. They are 10% of the population and only 1% have been granted permission. And we think very much of our Ethiopian Orthodox partners here at St George's following the horrible attacks on Coptic churches on Palm Sunday: (the Ethiopian Orthodox consider themselves very much part of the Coptic family.) These brothers and sisters will surely need to know very resolutely that the God of love cannot be crushed – if they are to survive without being overtaken by cynicism, vengefulness and despair. They will cling to the proclamation from the cross that underneath the violence and arbitrary injustices of the world, there is a deeper truth about living that cannot be taken away because it comes from the God of love. Later we will sing of the victorious Christ, "Praise to the holiest and in the depths be praise, a second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came", one who, "should strive afresh against the foe, should strive and should prevail". We, too, hold to this proclamation. Evil is overcome.

There are of course other theological approaches to the passion. While I was recovering recently following my hip operation, I came across one such in a very interesting book by the Methodist theologian Margaret Barker entitled 'Temple Theology'. In the first instance, the book sets out a very cogent argument to say that many of the earliest Christians (in a Jewish setting of course) saw Jesus through the lens of the theology and practices of the period of the first temple from the time of Solomon up to the sixth century BCE. The features of the first temple that are especially relevant here are the role played by the high priest, especially on the Day of Atonement, how the role was understood and how early Christians would have been likely to view Jesus as himself a great high priest after the order of Melchizedek. To summarise this as succinctly as possible, the high priest, as the sole person permitted to enter the holy of holies and perform the rituals of the Day of Atonement, was considered to be more than human. He was held to be a divine figure, often described as an angel, at home both on earth and in heaven; and he took the names Son Of God and Lord. In the first temple there was also a tradition of priest-kings, thus the high priestly role carried kingly connotations, adding to its authority. Critical for us was the ritual of the Day of Atonement, when the sins of the people were erased through very particular sacrifices with the casting of the blood of a bull and a goat over the altar in the holy of holies in an act of ritual cleansing. The cleansing was followed by the high priest performing another key action of placing both hands on the head of a second goat, the scapegoat, in a gesture of casting the sins of the people onto the head of the goat. And in this action the high priest was effectively carrying away the sins of the people out of the temple on to the goat, which was then taken away into the wilderness to die, often by being thrown off a cliff. Margaret Barker argues that the cleansing is a gesture for the renewal of creation as well as renewal of the covenant of hesed (loving kindness) between God and the people. It can be thought of as a great outpouring of reconciliation and restoration. It is perhaps not surprising that when early Christians knew Jesus as God's anointed one, witnessed his death on the cross and saw him acting against the temple of their day, they quite quickly came to see him through the figure of 'great high priest'. And this is of course exactly how Jesus is envisaged in the letter to the Hebrews. And so we read earlier, "Since we have a great high priest who has passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession." Or in Ch 9, "But when Christ came as a high priest,...

entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.” And he writer continues; “For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!... For this reason he is the mediator of a new covenant.” These passages illustrate how Jesus was understood to be enacting the second great function of the great high priest, of carrying away the sins of people, the sins of the world, through his own sacrifice of himself once offered, cleansing, renewing, restoring. He was acting after the fashion of the great high priest towards the people on the Day of Atonement. This day of Atonement sacrificial motif presents us with a vivid picture of how God acted, and acts, through Christ to effect salvation for humanity and creation. It takes us to the heart of the life-saving, victory-winning, mysterious and wonderful transformation achieved through the death of Christ – how he establishes the new covenant of grace and blessing that is salvation through the cross.

As we journey into ever deeper understandings of this holy day called ‘good’, with its rich and graceful promises of salvation, we surely can rejoice that we, and all others who turn to Christ, can find in him true solace. “Forbid it Lord that I should boast save in the cross of Christ my God,... love so amazing so divine demands my soul, my life, my all.” Amen.

2668 words

Reverend Julian Francis

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From Hebrews 4 v.16, “Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”