

Sermon for Good Friday, 2010 What If We Lost Good Friday?

The question loomed large this week on the website of an Anglican diocese to the north of here: What would we lose if Good Friday and Easter came off the calendar? It was a serious question, posed in a diocese which doesn't follow the rhythm of the church seasons; which faithfully preaches Christ crucified every week. The blog responses were varied, with some quite interesting, even worrying. From one minister, or presbyter, of that Diocese: "I would miss the holiday! But I wouldn't miss the holy-day...".. Another response "We wouldn't miss much, but it would be a shame." Yet others: "For the past almost 20 years I have had a Good Friday service which is like a Christmas carol service."; and how about this: "Oh... and another thing... can't we at least fix the date of Easter instead of it sliding all over March and April?"

Don't you love the rich diversity of the Anglican Church?

Despite these many varied responses to a provocative question, Good Friday - God's Friday - presents us with a different question -- perhaps even a puzzle.

I mean, as we stare at the horror of crucifixion, in that unsightly mess, how can we say that "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself?" By any normal standard, the cross -this politically expedient execution manoeuvred by the religious authorities - looks like the defeat of everything that Jesus was preaching, of everything that he said he was.

There really were many occasions when he could have taken steps to avoid all this. The obvious question, then and now: if he was the Son of God, he needn't have faced this cruel death. The taunt of the crowd, "How can he save others, when he cannot save himself?" is not just a cruel joke; it is the echo of the world's judgment on Jesus across all time.

So why did he submit to this death? Short answer, amongst the many layers of answers to this question: to show the world, and to offer the world -to us - a different sort of power that can drive life and *be* life. Not the power of military or brute force or mastery, nor of money or political domination or influence, nor control of people or resources.

Good Friday affirms that the power of the cross does not lie in Jesus falling back on the values of the world that would have us counter violence with violence, that would have us retaliate with whatever powers we would grasp, to fight the prospect of termination. The power of the cross lies in forgiveness, in peace, in a countercultural and counter intuitive way of responding to the violence of the others.

Yet somehow humankind has built an explanation of Christ's death around the image and theory of an angry and violent God. It's bewildering and unsatisfactory. It echoes the same values of violence that Jesus was putting to death. This theory has Jesus being offered as a sacrifice to expiate or make amends for or atonement for God's wrath. The starting position for this is that

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God is angry at human sin, and must be appeased. He takes the punishment owed to us. Hence the notion of Jesus being crucified to save us from that wrath. This is a theory with which many of us have been presented as unquestionable fact. If you haven't done so already, it's time to question that, in the light of a God of love.

As one scholar writes, in opposition to that view: "What if God just loves and is free to forgive without having to punish us or someone else in our place? What if God is like the father in the parable who ran to embrace his son and didn't have to beat him or anyone else in his stead before doing so? What if God doesn't need appeasing but by his nature wants to love, to create, to renew, to restore? What if Jesus embodies that love and shows it willing to endure even to the end? What if it is God whom we see in Jesus willing to love to the end? What if God is not the killer but the killed?"¹ And as another writer asserts: "When Good Friday is twisted into a transaction between a merciful Jesus and a wrathful God, it is emptied of its power." The power of reconciling love. The power of forgiveness that demands no victims. The power of such love that death was defeated.

We see consistently in Jesus the nature of a God who creates, renews, restores and simply loves; who gives and forgives in abundance, and who doesn't take any note of whom society or the authorities say is deserving of love, because *everyone* is worth God's love. *Everyone* – no-one is counted out because of their religious pretensions, or sexuality, or brokenness, or types of sin, or anything else. From Jesus' perspective, from his love of all of creation, **everyone** is worth giving his life for; everyone is worth him making a sacrifice of his love. This is not just Jesus, a good man given to us as an example of such sacrificial and inclusive love. Jesus was –is- God's Son, and he resolutely submitted to this death, taking to death with him all the ugliness and chaos of human life, and in his defeat of death, opening that doorway to a redeemed relationship with God.

Have you ever noticed that in this awful story, and on the Easter day that will follow it, Jesus never asks for an apology. Think about that -- we're killing him and he doesn't hold a grudge. What he does is pray for us. *Forgive them*. In that prayer he makes excuses for us, as though we do not know what we are doing when we reject truth and love, when we kill him and so many others, often for what we think is a good cause, often for what we know is a bad one.

To realize that we are loved when we are at our worst, our most destructive, is where the real redemption begins. To let that truth sink in is to be changed, to be restored.

Despised, rejected, marred beyond human semblance, Jesus has his arms nailed to the cross because we –humanity at its worst - want to do away with him, or won't risk saving him. But we find that those arms form an eternal embrace, and when we are embraced by them, we can return to the love for which we were created.

¹ William Loader

God is most glorified not by any demonstration of worldly power and might, not by being turned into a satisfied God from an angry God, but in his humble and patient forgiveness in the face of humanity's wrath and violence towards him.

While Good Friday calls each of us individually and corporately to confession, repentance, and transformation, the point of Good Friday is not obsessive guilt or the exaltation of divine violence, but the admission of our own tendencies to turn away from God's vision and God's constant creative-responsive love which bears our pain, laments our injustice, feels the cost of abandonment and oppression, and seeks healing in the most chaotic and painful situations.

And yes- Jesus died for us, not because he was taking our punishment on himself, but because through and by his love, he crashed through, destroyed the power of evil, and the ultimate power of death and the fear of death, to show us -to offer us - a new and life-giving way of life through his own body.

What would we lose if Good Friday and Easter came off the calendar? Well, that question has been taxing me. It's a good question, and I don't think I've yet nailed the answer. Certainly, we'd lose the calendar! We'd lose the wholeness of journey with Jesus' incarnation, birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension. Yes, this is the story that drives us as Christians every day. It is the story we re-enact every time we gather for Eucharist. But we'd lose that seasonal rhythm and symbol, the point of impact and commemoration, the wholistic balance we have across the year following Jesus, and in breaking open God's word to all his invitations of abundant life.

Today, on this holy and most solemn of days, hold that image of Christ's arms stretched out on the cross, embracing us, and imagine yourself stepping into that embrace. There's new life in that.