

Good Friday Sermon, Apr. 7, 2023

One of the ways I like to pray with Scripture is to imagine what it would have been like to be present back then. I think of the sights, the sounds, the smells. It helps to have a bit of a background on what things were like then, but it's not really about historical accuracy. It's a way to place myself in the story and allow the Scriptures to speak to me, to ask the Spirit to speak to me using the stories of Scripture. It's a way to open ourselves up to see what a particular passage or story is saying to us, here and now.

When I imagine being present at the crucifixion, it can be pretty overwhelming. That's what our Stations of the Cross service does, help us imagine it and also reflect on it. When I imagine myself back then, I tend to think of myself as being there with Mary the mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene and the Beloved Disciple, standing at the foot of the cross, being there with Jesus in his suffering, praying for him, loving him. Faithful.

I don't tend to imagine myself as Judas or Pontius Pilate or Caiaphas or the Roman soldiers or even the terrified disciples. I don't want to be the passersby who were heaping insults on Jesus. Did it ever occur to you that when they say, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross and save yourself and then we'll believe in you," that that is a real temptation for Jesus? It's the same temptation as the one to stand and throw himself down from the peak of the Temple. He resists that, both times, and goes with God's way rather than his way. But I hate even having to read those words when we do the passion reading. And the words "Crucify him!" I hate saying that.

I don't want to be one of the bad guys in this story. I like to think I would have been one of the good people, the women who were so brave and caring. That's who I want to be. Oh, and I don't particularly want to be Jesus either. Too hard.

But one of the things I find so helpful in reading Scripture is the universal nature of the stories. Even things that happened thousands of years ago can resonate with us today. Human nature is not so very different now than it was then. And it's important for our real understanding of this story, the story of Jesus' suffering and death, that we recognise the universal nature of this story.

Because the truth is, that each one of us is all those people. Each one of us has it in us to betray our friends. Probably we've done it. Not in such a way that they got killed, but small betrayals. Telling someone's secret, perhaps. I remember when I was a teenager, I'd done something or other and Dad was mad. He knew the younger two couldn't have done it and he said I had too much sense, so it must have been my brother Robert. Robert denied it, of course, but Dad thought he was lying. And I didn't want Dad to think I didn't have any sense, and I was afraid, so I kept silent and let Robert take my punishment. That was a betrayal.

Each one of us has it in us to manipulate people to get our own way, which may have been what Judas was trying to do: to get Jesus to act and become king. Force his hand. Each of us has it in us to be Judas from time to time.

And as for Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, they decided that this man Jesus was causing too much trouble. He was stirring up trouble with the Romans and he was going to upset the status quo, which was very favourable to them, and they had to stop him so as to maintain their cushy positions of power and influence. And maybe prevent a bloodbath. Caiaphas said, "It is fitting that one man should die for the people." Don't we sometimes abandon our principles for the sake of comfort and convenience? I know I do that.

Pontius Pilate was the governor. It was his job to keep peace. He was also supposed to administer justice, but in this case he did something he knew was wrong to avoid a riot. He knew Jesus was innocent, but he shrugged and crucified him anyway, to avoid a fuss. The end justifies the means, he might have said. And then he brushed off his responsibility for this by washing his hands and saying it was someone else's fault. But it was his responsibility. And the soldiers, just doing their job, not asking any questions. Have any of us ever taken the easy way out, even though we knew it wasn't entirely right? Perhaps gone along with people putting someone down because we didn't want to cause a fuss? Or be the next one being bullied? Just close our eyes to injustice and say we had no choice? Blame someone else? I know I've done that.

And I've abandoned friends in need, as the disciples did. Fallen asleep instead of staying with them in their struggle. Ducked out instead of standing up to injustice. Said things I didn't mean to get out of a tight spot, as Peter did. Sometimes joined the crowds who were calling someone down as the passersby did. Or even more often just said nothing. I've done all of that. Most of us have.

And yes, sometimes I've also been like those women who were there for Jesus and stayed with him to the bitter end. And sometimes I've been the one who was being treated unjustly and suffering what I didn't deserve, as Jesus did. Though I'm not usually as quick to forgive.

The point is, that all these people are us. And it is only when we come to terms with our own capacity to do evil that we can be freed from that. As long as we are denying our own dark side, it remains hidden in the dark and gains power over us. When we turn and face it, when we feel deep remorse for it, as Judas did, as Peter did, then we can be cleansed and healed from it. Jesus has already forgiven us from the cross: "Father forgive them. They don't know what they are doing." But if we bury our sins and pretend they're not there, we won't accept that forgiveness, because we don't want to admit we need it, and it won't do us much good.

When we recognise that we are capable of doing evil and even justifying ourselves for doing evil, then we can offer it to God. We can ask God to come in and cleanse us and heal us and forgive us and make us whole. And change us. And being aware of that capability for evil, we can keep an eye on it and keep it in check. Most of the time. It's a gradual process that lasts our whole life long.

Because the real point of this story is not that we are capable of doing evil as well as good. It is not that we human beings are a mixed bag. In our hearts, we all know that. The real point of this story is that God also knows that about us and loves us anyway. The real point of this story is that the Son of God was willing to call us to account and accept the fury we turned on him for telling us what we didn't want to know. The Son of God was willing to accept death at our hands and to still go on loving us.

Jesus forgave us even as we were nailing him to the cross to get rid of him. He forgave Judas and Caiaphas and Pilate and the disciples and the soldiers and the crowds, and all of us. The point of the Good Friday story is that we did the worst we could think of to the Son of God, and he continued being who he was, loving, forgiving, courageous, honest. Because nothing we can do can change who God is and what God is like. And of course, getting rid of him didn't work. Nothing we can do can get rid of God either.

There's something very humbling about being loved, even when we don't deserve it. Have you ever had the experience of doing something nasty to someone and then finally going and saying you're sorry and being forgiven? I have. I know I did something unkind that I shouldn't have done and I've said sorry and the person has forgiven me and gone on loving me. And it's humbling and it's always a bit amazing. I think we'd prefer, generally, to deserve to be loved rather than to have it given to us as a free gift when we don't particularly deserve it. Do you know what I mean?

But that's the miracle of Good Friday, why it's called "Good," that God loves us all even if we don't always deserve it. God doesn't love us because we're good. God loves us because God is good. Jesus takes our wounds and offers us healing. He takes our sins and offers us forgiveness. He takes our violence and offers us peace. He takes our hatred and offers us love.

And nothing gives God more joy than when we accept those gifts and love God in return.