Sermon for Good Friday Year A

Readings: Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22; John 18:1-19:42

i

“Like a sheep before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth.” Jesus can be so infuriating at times. Jesus’ example quite rightly constrains the reactions of Christians who in their turn face mockery, torture, injustice and religious prejudice. It is a huge challenge to follow the example of Jesus in such circumstances and offer the other cheek. All our human instincts are to resist, to accuse and to fight back. Our response is full of understandable anger at such outrages. Yet it doesn’t seem to have been how Jesus reacted. In fact he went so far as to say, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

So if Jesus won’t be angry, I’ll be angry on his behalf. I’m tempted to feel angry with the crowds that melted away as soon as the going got a little tough. They were happy to join in the singing on Palm Sunday when they imagined it would be a walk-over victory, but where were they on Good Friday when a bit more support might have made a difference?

In their defence, I guess you have to consider their confusion. The Messiah was supposed to come to mass jubilation, to be met with a national awakening of political pride and national purpose, to come in victory to renew the temple and assert the sovereignty of Judah. Yet after Palm Sunday’s victory parade, it had all turned into a damp squib.

The national religious leaders did not welcome Jesus; they told the crowd that he was a fraud and they had been duped. They even co-operated with the Roman Procurator to do away with him. When they were offered an apparent choice between freeing Jesus Barabbas and Jesus of Nazareth there was little doubt which they were supposed to choose.

I also feel a bit angry at times about all those fair-weather Christians who apparently supported Christ in the days when the Church provided the focus of community life, education for the poor, care for the sick, entertainment and festival colour in a dull routine, but who just melted away like frost in the morning sun when they had state hospitals and schools and televisions and cinemas for entertainment. Had they ever been truly committed to Christ? Why were they so easily bought off with the trappings of capitalism?

I feel angry too sometimes about how the religious leaders of the nation were the most vehement opponents. They could have engaged on a theological level much better than they did. Nicodemus proved to be one Pharisee who did give some deeper thought to what Jesus was saying. From awkward and furtive inquiry he came to speak up for a fair trial for Jesus at the Sanhedrin and then showed his sympathies by providing spices for his burial. Others reacted too much like Saul initially responded – with outraged hostility.

There is very little evidence of meaningful dialogue. Simon the Pharisee invites him for a meal, but by withholding the customary greetings of an embrace and the simple provision of water to wash his dusty feet, it was hardly a gesture of genuine hospitality and willingness to explore. Other highly intelligent lawyers and priests appear to have been only interested in trying to trip him up in front of the ordinary people rather than engage in true discourse.

Sadly, committed Christians have continued to be the authors of so many horrors and hypocrisies over the centuries that we haven’t needed a hostile world to resist Christ, for we have undermined him ourselves. It remains the sad truth that it is religious leaders who continue to express some of the most vitriolic, divisive and hurtful invective against those of whom they disapprove. It is Christian leaders who have been implicit in burning, torturing and imprisoning other believers over points of doctrine.

At a more mundane level, it’s religious people who squabble about replacing the church pews with chairs, or the pipe organ with a guitar. I feel angry sometimes that as Christians we are such a shower. But Jesus seems not to feel the same way.

ii

Jesus challenges my right to feel angry. If Jesus can say from the cross, “Father forgive them they know not what they do” – what right do I have to feel anger on his behalf or in similar situations?

The cross is about unconditional love. It is about God’s undying love for those who do not deserve it, for those who keep getting it wrong, for those who can’t really be bothered, for those who think they know better, for those whose misguided support ends up making matters even worse.

This is the scandal of the cross. It’s love not just for people like me and those I approve of who have made what I consider to be an appropriate response, to have shown acceptable loyalty, to have forged a sound religious faith, to have demonstrated exemplary forbearance with those who disagree. That is human love. Human love is conditional. Human love is partisan. Human love soon runs dry.

God has the right to feel angry with all of us in some measure, but in Jesus God has shown us that mercy and love are stronger than anger. We have been shown God’s love and mercy in Christ who refuses to feel angry at those who have wronged him.

That is the way of Jesus to which we are called.

iii

So here we are again gathered around the cross on Good Friday. Not as many of us as there should be, no doubt, but people are travelling for the Easter break, we say. Here we are again, despite the troubles and squabbles in the church council this past year. Here we are again when the world just wants us to get out of the way so it can move on – with opening the shops, or holding its race meetings and visiting its casinos. Yet here we are again, despite all of that.

Knowing all that is wrong with us, knowing all that is wrong with the Church, knowing the hostility or indifference of the world around us, why are we still here?

Well, I suppose it is because we know what is coming on the next page of the book in a way that those who first gathered around the cross could never have known. We know that this mess of injustice, cruelty, fear and confusion is followed by resurrection.

We gather today because we know all the mess of our world will not be the final word. We know the cross offers a hope that the world cannot give. We know the cross is the sign of Christ’s victory, not his defeat, and we trust that one day the whole world may know that mercy and love conquer the world’s mess and horror.

So we keep around the cross of Jesus despite our failings, our doubts, our compromises with worldly things because we want to live in a world where love and mercy are more important than things you can buy and where love and mercy are seen as true strength. We want to be the sort of people that can let go of our anger and embrace the life-giving power of love.

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