Sermon for Good Friday Year C

Responding to the Cross

It wasn’t supposed to work like that. In fact it was supposed to have the exact opposite effect. But it was just the start of countless millions who have responded to the cross by faith.

The whole idea of crucifixion was not simply to execute a criminal, prisoner of war, or a leader of rebellion it was specifically designed to do so in a most drawn -out and gruesome fashion. The humiliation of being stripped for execution, the terrible pain of the nails through the feet and hands, the slow, agonising death that usually took hours, but could even stretch into several days were all carefully calculated. This was not just execution; it was designed to be a deterrent. It was intended to give an unequivocal political message.

Yet in the case of Jesus, the opposite seems to have been the effect. If they had expected the crucifixion to stamp out this Jesus cult before it had started, then they were sorely disappointed. Some who had believed in Jesus before the cross continued to believe anyhow. At least one believed because of the cross and it’s possible that even the man who condemned Jesus to be crucified actually found faith in the act of condemnation. This latter figure is, of course, Pontius Pilate.

i

In the West we are not familiar with the idea that Pilate became a believer in the course of the trial of Jesus, but in the Eastern Church, Pilate is known as a saint. In the West, we are used to the image of Pilate who was either weak and gave in to the baying crowd, or backed into a corner and who tried to keep the peace by allowing an innocent man to die, or possibly just a bureaucratic bungler who washed his hands of the whole affair because he didn’t have the wit or courage to find a better solution.

But in the East, Coptic Christians see Pilate as a man who changed his mind about Jesus in the course of the trial. Three times, he declared Jesus innocent. He tried both to have him flogged in a bid to satisfy their blood lust and then to have him released to mark the Passover festival. Only when he felt he had no other option, did Pilate allow Christ to be handed over to be crucified. That is why, when asked by the chief priests to change the wording on the cross to ‘*This man claims to be* the King of the Jews,” did Pilate refuse, for he had written what he had written fully intending the interpretation the chief priests resented.

If the Coptic Christians are right, Pilate represents that sort of believer who comes to faith after a long time of unbelief. Pilate started off with a mixture of scepticism and indifference. Like most people today, he didn’t have any particular view of Jesus before the trial commenced. Had it not been brought before his attention, he would gladly have gone through life without any firm view about Jesus and not thinking it mattered much either way. But circumstances conspired to make him involved. He had to grapple with the question of who Jesus was and what he had done. It was not a confrontation he had sought, but when he began to take the question seriously, he found himself drawn in to faith. “Behold the man, the King of the Jews” was his confession; but was that said in mockery or dawning faith?

The story of Pilate challenges us today who claim to believe in the cross of Jesus. How many more are there out there who are just going through life without any view on Jesus at all? How many are there who assume that it just isn’t important for them to consider? So should not part of our response be to take our faith in the cross out to those who have no faith, who are indifferent or even hostile to the whole question? For the sakes of all those other Pilates out there who just might come to faith when squarely faced with the challenge of who this Jesus really is?

We should have the courage not to hide our faith under a bushel, but put it out there a bit more often, like a city set upon a hill, and risk the rejections that will come for the sake of the few scoffers, who, unexpectedly like Pilate, will respond.

ii

Then there was Mary Magdalene. By the time Mary stood at the cross she had long become part of the inner circle of followers of Christ. We cannot be sure what the precise meaning is that she had had seven demons cast out her, but we can infer that she was deeply indebted to Jesus and became a follower from the time of that first encounter and supported Jesus’ ministry financially, along with some other women from Jerusalem and Galilee. What must the cross have meant to her? Was it the death of her dreams? Was it the apparent rejection by God that Jesus was not the one whom she had thought him to be? Did the cross not only mean that Jesus had got it terribly wrong, but that she had also in believing him? Mary must have been clinging on with her finger nails. She did not run away like the men had done; she stayed to the end and was there when they took him down from the cross, when Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea laid him to rest. On Sunday in the garden Mary was going to visit a tomb, not looking for a risen saviour.

Mary Magdalene stands at the cross for all those other believers who believe yet do not understand. She stands for all those who have more questions than answers, yet still stay. She stands for all those for whom their faith brings as many doubts as certainties, for whom faith brings agonising and turmoil, but who still stay by the side of Jesus. Let us take our faith to the Mary Magdalenes of this world. Let us bring understanding, reassurance and sympathy. Let us allow them to stand in that place and not try to force them onto the solid ground that we may deem more appropriate for Christian belief. Let us go in the knowledge that Mary received answers to her questions. That standing by the cross was not in vain; that her trust in Jesus was not misplaced; that it’s ok to know you don’t have all the answers, in the knowledge that God knows both all the questions and all the answers and will one day share them with us.

iii

Then there was Nicodemus. He should have been there at the cross, but on the other side. He could have been with his fellow Pharisees, mocking the upstart Galilean who had filled the people’s heads with nonsense. He was one of the experts. If anybody should have seen through Jesus, then it was someone like Nicodemus. Plenty of his fellow Pharisees had rejected him. He might have stood among his fellow Pharisees encouraging Christ to come down off the cross and save himself.

But it was because Nicodemus was an expert and had given Jesus due expert consideration that he was there. He was there to the end and he offered spices for the burial. There would have been no going back now. It had been obvious where his sympathies lay during the trial before the Sanhedrin. By coming forward to assist in the burial, he had shown his loyalties and he could expect to take the consequences, which tradition suggests he later had to do.

He had come to stand beside the cross in support of Jesus because he had taken the trouble to go to Jesus himself and ask the questions he needed to ask. He had not just followed the crowd. He had not been carried along by the general opinion of his fellow Pharisees. Nicodemus had thought long and hard about this and by the time of the crucifixion, he knew where he stood, and he also had a good idea of the possible consequences.

Nicodemus stands for all those who patiently search the scriptures, study theology, give themselves the time to think deeply about these things and having weighed up the arguments, come to belief and are prepared to stand by that whatever the world may think. Nicodemus and his like have been the back bone of the Church. Without the Nicodemus spirit, there is no Church in any age. We need the best minds to look closely at Jesus. We are not afraid of what they might find; for those who lay aside the propaganda of others and the common assumptions of the world will come and see and believe.

iv

Then there was the soldier by the cross who saw Jesus die. He just happened to be there. It wasn’t part of any planning on his part. He was on duty at that time in that place and given that task. Yet when he saw Jesus upon the cross, he came to faith, proclaiming, “Truly, this was the Son of God.”

This man stands for all those whose lives are thrown upside down because of circumstances. He stands for all those people who were just getting on with life, with no great interest, no firm convictions in religious matters, when suddenly through experiencing or just witnessing illness, calamity, accident or a sudden death are made to face up to the big questions in life.

What does it all mean? Is there a purpose? Are we able to kill off the idea of God? Who is this Jesus and what does his life and death mean to me? Sometimes we encounter the transformation of our lives through tragic circumstances. In the face of horror, we actually find faith. In the deepest darkness, we see light. No one would ever choose the horror, or seek such darkness, but that just makes the faith and the light all the sweeter. The soldier’s story lives on today wherever lives are torn apart by the world, yet somehow in that tearing, are healed.

Pilate, Mary Magdalene, Nicodemus, a common soldier – and eventually in that list come you and me. It’s time for us to write our story. What will standing by the cross do to our lives?

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