

Sermon for Good Friday

RCL Lectionary

[Isaiah 52:13-53:12](#) / [Hebrews 10:16-25](#) / [John 18:1-19:42](#) / [Psalm 22](#)

April 2nd, 2010

The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour

Mill Valley, California

Just Another Good Friday

by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

It is on the one hand just another Good Friday, and the world goes on its own way, mixed as it is with news good and bad. Employment reports this day give certain hope that the worm of the global economy is beginning to turn, though there still is a long and difficult road ahead for many. Haiti and Chile continue the long and difficult process of climbing from the rubble, stench, and death of natural disaster. War machines bring more violence to Gaza as Christian pilgrims gather for this holy day in Jerusalem, Jewish families continue to celebrate Passover, and faithful Muslims labor to rebuild civil society in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Our sisters and brothers in the Roman Catholic Church this Holy Week face the scepter of a holy institution roiled by scandal, shaking the very foundations of ancient hierarchies just as it shakes the hearts of the faithful and their trust in their leadership. It's tempting to fall into the old Protestant pastime of knocking Catholics for their failings. But we pray this day as we have always prayed on Good Friday, asking God to graciously behold this family – this family for whom our Lord Jesus Christ was willing to be betrayed – this family not over and against *that* family over there, but this one family of our common humanity, bound as we are together by the cross. So the pain of the Roman Catholic Church this day is our pain, too. Even if it is at one level only the garden variety sin of pride laid bare – the revelation in the cross that our ecclesiastical institutions can pain our beloved Christ just as much as any sharp nail or piercing spear.

Meanwhile, we know in our community and families that death is near for some of us. That pain is the greatest reality right now for others. That some of us struggle to keep our homes and to find work. That some of us are exhausted by the sheer weight of the realities that face us both here and now and beyond those doors when the Good Friday services conclude.

Would that Good Friday meant a final end to the cycle of corruption and scandal and violence and pain and death that continues in the human family, and for that matter the groaning of all Creation. But the present realities of the world and the strains and fractures and pain we each bring in our own way to this place this day only highlight that Christ's crucifixion for us is fully present in this moment, in our midst, in our lives. . . in the depths of our very hearts.

For centuries, we have struggled to make sense of this visage, this cross, the self-offering of our beloved Savior to a most gruesome and tragic end: An end that is as visceral as it is spiritual, as anchored in the harsh realities of pain as it is elevated to the giddy heights of symbol, as centered in a passing moment as it is eternal.

And why do we need it? Why do we need a cross, a Messiah who dies, and a God who dares to look into the very face of our worst imaginings and most wicked machinations? The answers are as perhaps as numerous as we are:

I suppose if we believe in a wrathful God, angry with us for our sinfulness, we need a Messiah who pays the price for our reconciliation.

If we believe humanity has been enslaved by sin, evil, and death, we need a Messiah who offers the ransom for our souls to restore us to life.

If we find ourselves oppressed, we need a Messiah who liberates us; if we are ourselves the oppressor, we need a Messiah to confronts us, who bodily stands between us and our victims in God's name.

If we believe in a loving God wooing us back from our deep tendency towards self-serving grasping and wanton destruction, we need a Messiah who stretches out his arms on the hard wood of our cold hearts, breaking them open and drawing us back to God's life-giving heart.

If we believe in a God wanting to restore the miracle of Creation, even to draw it into greater glory, we need a Messiah who gathers the sap and DNA of our lives, who joins with the dance of consciousness, earth, and stardust as we all do each day and every day, who knows the scorching power of the noonday sun and the piercing reality of metal, and the saltiness of our blood.

Good Friday and the breadth of our Christian tradition contains all these perspectives and more: the mystery of the cross is not so much in our trying to understand Christ's passion; but that through it, God understands ours: our suffering, our mendacity in our conflicted loyalties, our divided hearts that make us at once a people who shout "Hosanna!" and a mob that yells, "Crucify him!" Who knows our pain, our life, and our death. Who knows our oppression and our freedom. Who knows our loves and our hatreds.

It is in the cross of Jesus that the suffering of humanity, and even the pain of all creation, is fully embraced by our Creator, is embodied in the divinity made one with fragile flesh, in the precious grace of a life freely offered so that all might live.

As contemporary theologian Christopher Evans puts it: "On the cross Jesus completes his embrace of the human condition and of fleshly existence all the ways down, for all sorts and conditions, once for all in every time and place."¹

The cross stands forever. Maybe not because God needs it so much as we do. It stands in the face of our scandals and conflicts, in the midst of our violence from our accidental to our most willful, in our sufferings and in our unmet needs. It stands in the Church that has failed us countless times, in our relationships where we have learned the bitterness of betrayal, in our despairing laziness and unwillingness to commit; in our goal-oriented, task-driven lives where we have learned that we are not really in control. It stands as witness to our impending death and the decay that always dogs us.

And it says to us that God knows all this, too. And not only understands it, but embraces it, becomes one with it, gives up every conceivable purity to be God amidst the violence in Gaza, the God at the Seder, the God rebuilding the impossibly broken, the God sorrowing over scandal as victim and struggling leader, the God who is unemployed and underemployed, the God who is homeless, the God who struggles to move the best of each of us forward, the God who labors to restrain and even transform the worst in us. Our God, this God, this God of the cross, who ate and sang, who prayed and talked, who bleeds and dies as one of us, so that even our greatest tragedies and our worst imaginings are not beyond the reach of grace, of love, and the hope of renewal.

¹ Christopher Evans: "What God is This? (Re)Connecting Crucifixion, Incarnation, and Creation"
http://www.episcopalcafe.com/daily/theology/what_god_is_this_reconnecting.php