

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A R Cole
Good Friday
April 2nd, 2021

Isaiah 52:13-53:12
Psalm 22
Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9
John 18:1-19:42

I had three conversations over the last week or so that all pertain to today. The first was with some teenagers about the problem of evil and suffering in the world and how can we believe in an all good and all powerful God who allows these things to be.

The second was with a sick person who was unsure how things were going to go for them.

The third was with someone who had lost almost everything due to COVID.

Sometimes the ordinary gentleness and kindness and sympathy of the secular or the Christian person may go a long long way but, in the end they are not enough. They do not address these things at the heart of the matter.

One of the oldest poems in English literature is the Anglo-Saxon poem the Dream of the Rood. It was probably written in the 8th Century and its tone is very much that of the warrior society in which it was written. Christ is here pictured, not as a victim, but as a hero who takes on the cross

willingly as if he were stepping forward into a battle. What is more unusual still, is that it tells the story of the crucifixion from the point of view of the cross itself, now honoured and covered with gold, but then just a tree cut down and made into a rood, a cross.

I saw then the Lord of Mankind
hasten with much courage, willing to mount up upon me.

.....

I quaked when the warrior embraced me—
yet I dared not bow to the ground, collapse
to earthly regions, but I had to stand there firm.
The rood was reared. I heaved the mighty king,
the Lord of Heaven—I dared not topple or reel.

Tonight, the Church is bare. The altar is stripped and the ornate crosses are covered. This is to convey something of the emptiness and desolation of the cross which is of course our focus today.

As the name Good Friday suggests today is a mixture of opposites. We cover the ornate crosses because they remind us of the triumph that is won there today, but that is not seen until the new dawn two days hence. Today we are confronted by the cross as it was in its original conception. A means

of torture and killing – a scaffold for the wicked and the lawless. In its harsh lines we see punishment and the cold exercise of human power over those who have earned the ultimate rejection of human society.

And yet this Friday is Good indeed because - despite the pain and the darkness and the death we know it has won for us a freedom that is the greatest good of all. Evil is not – as anyone knows who has had to do it – confronted and defeated without a cost. Our sins and the sin of human kind build up into a wall that cannot be breached without an act of supreme goodness by the only one who can truly be called good.

And so, as we gather around the foot of the cross, we have just heard the words of St John as the choir sung his passion. This is what happened. It is what happened to a man 2000 years ago, but it also happened to many many others. What is different here is who it happened to. It is what happened to God's goodness and love reaching out to mankind to rescue us. It is what always happens when anyone stands up for life and the right and the good. The darkness of self-interest and greed and the paranoia of power rises up in fury to crush that which threatens it.

Shortly we will place a bare wooden cross before our eyes and reflect on what it means. We will hear the reproaches – those lines that accuse our

world and ourselves for our part in what has brought this sacrifice about. “
O my people, what have I done unto thee- that thou hast prepared a cross
for thy saviour?”

We will then pray and keep silence and reflect on this awesome sign as we
hear the bell toll 33 times, once for each year of Christ’s life. It tolls for
him, but we know it tolls for us too, and for our part in the brokenness of
the world he came to save.

This cross that speaks of the two principal dimensions of life. That of the
spirit flying, that of the body lying – the vertical arrow that points to the
highest that human beings can achieve and the flat horizontal that points
to the physical death that all must one day also know. In this sign we see
both Gods saving work but also the crossroads of our own lives – the nexus
at which all that is good and noble and true in us meets all that is tawdry
and broken and sad in us. Here the former may find release and the latter
can be taken and made clean and whole and we may find healing for our
souls.

Here is a sign that all might believe in – a sign that avoids nothing of the
truth, however unpleasant and grim – a sign that will stand in the darkest
corners of human experience and still speak hope to men – be that in the

hospice or on the battlefield – be it in the persecution of the helpless few, or in the failure we have known in our selves when we have turned away from the light, or be it under the eyes of those who hate us and watch for the chance to work our downfall. Here is the only sign that will stand in the shadow of ultimate evil and death and not fail. Here is the sign that does address the problem of evil and suffering, that does speak to the sick person whose future is uncertain and does provide a way for someone who has lost everything. It does it because the cross shows that God enters into these things, embraces them and confronts them and, ultimately defeats them because once death is defeated, they all are. We don't sing this hymn this year as our voices remain silenced by the pandemic but here is just two verses that express our praise of the sign that is death today, but that two days hence, will be made the sign of life.

Faithful cross, above all other:
one and only noble tree!
None in foliage, none in blossom,
none in fruit thy peer may be:
sweetest wood and sweetest iron,
sweetest weight is hung on thee.

3 Praise and honor to the Father,
praise and honor to the Son,
praise and honor to the Spirit,
ever Three and ever One:
one in might and one in glory
while eternal ages run.