

“AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS” RE-IMAGINED

Sermon for Good Friday, March 30, 2018

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Maybe like me, you have memories of evangelical preachers saying on Good Friday and at other times, “come to the foot of the cross, and lay your burdens down, and Christ will take them, and deal with them and you will know freedom especially regarding your sins which have been dealt with through Christ’s sacrifice.”

I don’t want to diminish these statements and the sentiment which lies behind them. Following Hebrew Temple ritual and practice I can well understand how some early Christians appreciated the cross and Christ’s very real suffering and sacrifice in such Hebraic terms. The act itself, of offering, either by an ancient priest taking animals and burning them as offerings, or by extension as Christ’s own self offering as the high priest of all does bring humanity and God together in a special re-union.

Such an understanding however risks a certain narcissism – “it’s all about me and my sins.” There is however so much more to the cross, and Christ’s amazing willingness, in the words of Paul to the Philippians, to pour himself out as an offering, not clinging to God for power, prestige or safety, but accomplishing a seemingly impossible power over evil *by virtue of his vulnerability*.

In our day, Brené Brown has much to teach us about vulnerability:

Vulnerability is basically uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. I was raised in a “get ‘er done” and “suck it up” family and culture (very Texan, German-American). The tenacity and grit part of that upbringing has served me, but I wasn’t taught *how to deal with*

uncertainty or how to manage emotional risk. I spent a lot of years trying to outrun or outsmart vulnerability by *making things certain* and definite, black and white, good and bad. My inability to *lean into the discomfort of vulnerability* limited the fullness of those important experiences that are wrought with uncertainty: Love, belonging, trust, joy, and creativity to name a few. Learning how to be vulnerable has been a street fight for me, but it's been worth it.

The sign and image of Christ on the cross, a self-offering which defies human logic (surely there must be other ways to transform a world gone crazy) speaks to our deepest fears and anxieties. Surely the only power which can transform culture is a greater and opposite power we tell ourselves. The only solution to overwhelming fear, is to protect ourselves from all risk, assuming that is actually possible. Archbishop Rowan Williams suggests however something quite different:

(W)hen the very roots of our anxiety and fear are challenged . . . we come to be less afraid of one another, of what's different or uncomfortable. When we face what's *really other* – the person, or situation, culture, philosophy, religion – quite often the anxiety with which we approach it is an anxiety that perhaps we won't survive the encounter. But if God has said to us, '*Don't be afraid, I have overcome the world, what exactly is there to be afraid of?*'"

It's a good question. Why are we afraid – of persons, rivals, ideas, dislocations, of uncertainty itself! Fears *seem* real, and sometimes *are* real depending on our context. A favourite song from the Iona community simply says, "Don't be afraid, my love is stronger, my love is stronger than you fear . . ." Well I don't know about you, but I have all sorts of doubts about that. Fear seems all-powerful to me on occasion. The song continues "my love is stronger, and I have promised to be always near." In *the promise itself*, lies hope – you are not alone – the

Footprints poster reveals that God carries our fright and weight. Hope is demonstrated, dramatically and truthfully on Good Friday and thankfully also on other days.

Today however we cannot avoid thinking about death, our own maybe, the death of others, or of ideals, or of love, or of community. We each feel robbed of each of these from time to time. Circumstances will dictate the details of our struggle - physical illness, communal isolation, external threats to life and livelihood. Thankfully, today's assertion is that *death is real, but conquerable*.

For all of us, death is inevitable. Sometimes with a smile I remind folks that "life . . . is a terminal condition." This is the message of Ash Wednesday. You and I are mortal, and we can and must embrace our mortality somehow. It need not however overwhelm us; and God bless those who struggle with such things. I like Williams' line: "God is never at the end of his resources when we are at the end of ours." What Christ shows us today, is not only a wholehearted commitment to love and life, to us and to everything. Even here, at the foot of the cross, we are pointed towards a new and unimaginable *beginning*, not *ending*. Again, Williams:

"(W)hat the Christian gospel offers is indeed a new beginning. It is indeed something from nothing, life from death, light from darkness. And at the same time it is, mysteriously, the transformation of what we have become: real flesh and blood human beings with our histories, with the lines etched in our faces by those metaphorical four thousand winters."

In individual and communal situations, death is neither the victor nor the end. Christ's offering opens up life in a visionary way. Williams continues:

"The Roman Empire . . . didn't have room for the vision of humanity that the gospel introduced. And thus Christianity was a nuisance to the Roman Empire, as it was a nuisance to the Third Reich and the Soviet Union. It's quite a challenge in contemporary China . It even has its nuisance moments in the UK and the USA ... And it's because of this conviction that *the way things happen to be is not the way they have to be* that Christians go on being tiresome,"

For me, the line "the way things happen to be is not the way they have to be" sums up things nicely. We *can* live differently, uniquely, truthfully, lovingly, informed by Gospel values exemplified in Christ's life and self offering. If "Jesus is the point where human histories converge" we have an opportunity to create a different history, not conjured from humanity, but inspired by divinity amongst and within us. "The Saviour comes right down to the depths of the forsaken world and draws the whole complex of reality back up, home to God."

So, today, and at all times, God calls, and says to everyone, welcome home!