



A Homily by The Very Reverend Tim Dobbin

Good Friday

April 2, 2021

Scripture Passage: Mk 14.1-15.47

So what's so 'good' about Good Friday? How could we ever describe the senseless suffering of an innocent person as good? It's an obvious question. Standing on its own without reference to what will happen in three days' time, today could never be called 'good.' And viewed from our perspective alone, today could never be described as 'good.'

The truth for us as Christians is the events we commemorate today must always be read through the lens of the events we will celebrate in three days' time. We are an Easter people. We worship today in the sure and certain knowledge that what happened today is not the last word. There's a lot more to come. Good Friday. Second, the title 'Good Friday' may be a corruption of the phrase 'God's Friday.' Whilst from our own viewpoint, we'd be hard pressed to call today 'good,' it is good because the Church invites us to see today not so much from our vantage point but from God's. Today is good because despite all appearances to the contrary, God has everything in hand. God's Friday... Good Friday.

Jesus' dying on a cross is not some hair-brained scheme that back-fired horribly; that forced God into hyper fix-it mode. Our belief is that the event we commemorate was part of God's plan from the beginning of Creation. Everything that happened today had to happen for God to restore and heal and reconcile a creation that was otherwise on a one-way ticket to oblivion. Good Friday.

One of the truths we acknowledge on Good Friday is that Jesus accomplishes God's mission of healing and reconciliation not so much by what he does but by what is done to him. This is what we mean by 'passion.' Jesus chooses willingly to embrace what is being done to him; in so doing fulfils God's plan for the restoration of all the created order – the Good Friday way of grace-filled surrender.

And Jesus didn't have to do this. He could have played safe. He could have protected himself. When he saw just how riled up the religious brass were getting, he could have gone to ground. He could have toned down his message. He could have stopped hanging around with outcasts. He could have shown far more respect for the establishment. He could have. But he didn't, did he? He didn't protect himself. Rather he offered himself for us, and kept offering himself for us. He stayed in the open. He not only preached, he lived out his confrontational message. He sought out those on the margins. He challenged corrupt institutions. He could have protected himself. Today we recall that Jesus chooses not to protect himself, but to offer himself... offer himself for us in the most complete way possible. In so doing, he fulfils God's mission by what is done to him – the Good Friday way of grace-filled surrender.

What might this mean for us, especially in the midst of a pandemic? As Henri Nouwen observes, perhaps what Jesus' passion means for us, is recognizing that our life is shaped not only by what we do, but by what is being done to us – by our passion as much as by our action. One of the gifts of this pandemic is the opportunity to see more clearly that large swathes of our life is passion – things being done to us. Sure, some of our life is shaped by what we think, say and do. Our passion, what is done to us and how we respond to what is done to us, including all that a pandemic would visit upon us, may have an even greater bearing on our lives.

At a recent Centring Prayer meeting, Thom Davies recounted a story he heard from the renowned OT scholar Walter Brueggemann some 25 years ago. It is a story about passion, about recognizing that so much of our life is shaped not only by what we do, but by what is being done to us – and the Good Friday way of grace-filled surrender.

In his lecture, Brueggemann identified the sense of loss, grief and anger then being experienced in North America. It was the pain some were feeling through the rightful exposure and challenging of those cultural values undergirding North American society – male privilege, white privilege, heterosexual privilege, European privilege, Christian privilege... The angst and threat occasioned with their being exposed was translating at that time into increasing rates of domestic violence and racial tension; perhaps more recently, into the seditious assault on the Capitol on January 6. The safe, reliable, predictable world we once knew was and is being eroded.

There was a woman at that small gathering of folk with Walter in Atlanta 25 years ago. She later shared with him the impact his talk on loss had had on her life. Here's how Thom recalled her story.

When she was a child her Daddy had a little shop in downtown Atlanta - next to Rich's. Rich's was the great department store in Atlanta. People thought Rich's had the best customer service; in fact the best everything... in the history of the world. People loved Rich's.

It was the place where white women used to take their daughters for tea. When she was a little girl, she'd go to her Daddy's shop after school. Sometimes, he'd take her to Rich's for a Coca-Cola.

Well guess what? Rich's is now gone. Rich's went bankrupt. And now where Rich's used to be, there's the Sam Nunn Atlanta Federal Center. And she told Walter than whenever she drove past the Sam Nunn Atlanta Federal Center, she just got mad, really mad... partly because Rich's was gone.

Only it wasn't just about Rich's. It was about her Daddy and her childhood and this overwhelming sense of loss that wouldn't go away. Her world just wasn't the same anymore.

So she thought about these things for a while after Walter's lecture on loss. One day she got in her car and drove down to where Rich's used to be. She parked her car across the street from what was now the Sam Nunn Atlanta Federal Centre. She sat in her car. And she started to cry. She cried and she cried and she cried for about an hour. She sat in her car and cried. A 57-year-old woman in her parked car crying.

She cried about Rich's. She cried about Atlanta – it not being the way it used to be anymore. She cried about her life – and all the opportunities that were now behind her.

And after she had cried long enough she drove her car over to her church. For the first time in her life, she went into the church and signed up to help in the church's soup kitchen.

Here's how she attempted to explain her action that day to Brueggemann. 'When I relinquished the city that was gone, I discovered the freedom to sign up and help a little – to help build the city that now has to be created.' She continued, 'Faith is turning loose... letting go of what God has taken from us' – perhaps she was describing the Good Friday way of grace-filled surrender.

As Thom recalled, the moral of the story for Walter Brueggemann was simple. He drawled in that craggy prophetic voice of his. 'You can receive nothing new from God as long you are wrapped up in a fetal position protecting the world - the way the world used to be.' You can receive nothing new from God as long you are wrapped up in a fetal position protecting the world - the way the world used to be.

Two thousand years ago, with all the destructive forces in creation marshalled against him, Jesus too could have wrapped up in a fetal position protecting himself, even protecting the world, protecting the way the world wanted him to be. Only he didn't, did he? Instead he offered himself. And in offering himself, in choosing the Good Friday way of grace-filled surrender, he fulfilled God's mission to restore this beautiful and broken world God loves so much.

Jesus laid down his life, that you and I might be free, free to partner with God in building what now has to be created, even in the midst of a pandemic – the good in Good Friday.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.