

What Son of Man is this?

Jeremiah 31:31-34, John 12:20-34

18 March 2018

Having celebrated Mothering Sunday last week, as a kind of stop-over, we are now continuing on our Lenten journey as we retrace Jesus' steps to Jerusalem through Palm Sunday and Holy Week, through the depth of Good Friday, the disturbing wonder of the empty tomb to the glorious day of Resurrection on Easter Sunday. We have already explored some of the meanings of the Cross a few weeks ago, when we have heard Mark's account of Jesus' 'real death as a real son of man on a real cross'. Today's Lectionary reading turns our attention to John's Gospel and its understanding of the Cross.

As we begin to reflect on it I am reminded of a photograph I've seen of the entrance to the beautiful, modern Metropolitan Cathedral in Brasilia. It has made a great impression on me and may have talked about it before. This is an amazing building in the shape of a down turned, open flower head with great glass surfaces between curved white concrete pillars. As you approach the place you are welcomed by four larger-than-life bronze sculptures of the four evangelists. What is surprising though is the way they are arranged. It's not two on one side and two on the other, - as natural symmetry would require - but three: Matthew, Mark and Luke on one side and John, on his own on the other, facing them.

We are so familiar with Jesus' Passion narrative as year by year we meet it in the different Gospels that we have built up a kind of seamless story of its events in our minds complete with one particular understanding, which we have just reminded ourselves of, that, we may not notice, what the sculptor of those statues in Brasilia was quite keen to show: the Fourth Gospel is not like the other three, in many respects it almost stands over against them. All the more interesting then to contemplate the Lectionary compilers' choice of Gospel readings over the three years of the Lectionary cycle: they

have designated a year each to Matthew, Mark and Luke, but none to John. However in all three Lectionary years they use John's Gospel exclusively for Holy Week, the week leading up to Easter, which constitute the kernel of our Christian faith. This enables us to reflect on more than one meaning of the Cross.

So what is different in John's understanding and what does that mean to us, 21st century followers of Jesus? Well, there are many obvious and many more subtle differences, but today I would like us to think about the idea in our reading, which has Jesus saying: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." We would like to say, yes, we understand, Jesus is to be glorified on the Day of the Resurrection, the day on which victory is won over sin and death. But from the context of these words in this Gospel, it becomes clear that it is Jesus' cruel execution, his crucifixion; his innocent death that is pinpointed as the moment of his 'glorification'. Now, this is something new and unexpected. We could even say that it is perhaps too hasty, too triumphalistic; that it by-passes the horrors of Good Friday, which were all too real, all too traumatic for Jesus' disciples. They couldn't possibly see of any kind of glorification at the time, only an abrupt and heart-breaking end to a promising and hopeful venture.

Well, maybe, the explanation is in the use of the word 'glorification', the root of which is 'glory'. GLORY is one of those intangible things that we talk of a lot in church, and have just sang about it a few minutes ago. But even here we do not think very deeply about its meaning. We have a vague feeling that it is to do with some kind of divine brightness and splendour, God's sovereignty and righteousness, a kind of radiance, or heavenly bliss. If we look at the way the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament) uses the word 'glory' we see that it is invariably to do with God, and it tries to describe the indescribable presence of God as experienced by the people of Israel. Initially they have found it in natural phenomena, like thunder and lightning, later it was associated with the cloud

leading the people of God in the wilderness and covering Mount Sinai where Moses received the Ten Commandments and even later they sensed it in the cloud filling Solomon's Temple at the time of its dedication.

So, when the Fourth Gospel puts Jesus' glorification at the time of his torturous death this is what is claimed: God is revealed and met in the very depth of pain and suffering and death, and here specifically in Jesus' self-giving love, which transcends even the most natural, human instinct of self-preservation; A love that does not retaliate but with great integrity follows its course whatever it takes.

John then is not concerned here with the Cross as the symbol of forgiveness in a tit-for-tat manner, where someone has to pay a price for others to receive forgiveness, a place for a problem to be solved, a reaction to human sin. Rather he understands it as Jeremiah does in our first reading: as a revelation of the very heart of God, God's pre-emptive, free love, and eternal generosity that forgives without pre-condition. And he sees Jesus as the living 'icon of that invisible God' to use a phrase from the Letter to the Colossians. (Col 1:15).

It takes some doing to see this in the brutal image of Good Friday and call it Jesus' glorification. No wonder that the people hearing Jesus' words about his impending death could not comprehend it. They were not expecting their Messiah to die in such a disgraceful manner, well before his time. In fact, according to their beliefs the Messiah would never die at all. Hence their probing question: "What Son of Man is this?" It is their very religiosity, which actually prevents them from recognising the things of God as they come to them in unexpected ways. I think, all of us, religious people, have this temptation, our beliefs have a tendency to get so solidified, never questioned, never re-visited that we are in danger of missing the true encounter with God, who comes to us in newness, in ways perhaps different to how our forebears experienced God's living Spirit.

Isn't it a sobering thought that it is a Gentile centurion, unburdened by traditional religious ideas, who, according to Mark's Gospel, recognises the Cross for what it is? In the way this suffering, innocent man is dying on the gallows he discovers something of the presence (glory) of God. And he finds it so utterly compelling that he speaks the words "Surely this man must have been a son of God." And as we listen to Jesus' words further in our passage today, we can say of the Centurion: Surely, this man is the first of those multitudes, whom Jesus will draw to himself as they gaze on the Cross with his hanging figure on it.

It is his dying, self-giving love that calls forth our love and the love of those multitudes who have been and are still being drawn to him. We feel a strong kinship with him in his suffering and deep down we know what Dietrich Bonhoeffer meant when he said "only a suffering God can help us". In the Gospel Jesus uses the picture of a dying grain of wheat, which must die in order to bring in the harvest. And he addresses his followers with this telling picture. They too must die to many things; their compulsion for success, to be held in great regard within their group, to do good things perhaps, but only for the sake of self-glory and self-satisfaction. It is when they are ready to give all that up that they will find themselves in that new and eternal life, which is already open to them.

As we approach our Lord's Table on this last ordinary Sunday in Lent with Palm Sunday already on the horizon, we bring our Thanksgiving for the gift of courage, which enabled Jesus to look all the pain and suffering and deathliness in the face and to find the glory and love of God behind it. May we too answer his call and dare to follow him even into the darkest reaches of our life and find ourselves in the safe arms of our gracious and generous God.

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