

GOOD FRIDAY

We like to think that if we are faced with things which are lovely, if someone is kind to us whom we had always feared or we were rude to, that if people encounter something which is lovable and good, they will respond in kind; beauty to beauty, love to love. No doubt that happens, but there is a darker reality and we see it today. Today perfect beauty has shown itself among us, wisdom has fed us from her table, truth has been spoken. Jesus makes God known and makes Him experienced and this beauty is seen; and what happens? Humanity turns sour and instead of beauty, it shows ugliness, and rather than respond with love it – we have responded with destruction and hate.

This happens in our world in dense and dark colours – think of the run of suicide bombers in Iraq and that is not alone. When holy persons have come and done good things, then often the reaction to them has been a violent one and even a premature death. Today that happens as in no other case. Evil is tempted into the light and it kills it as it were; love - supreme love, beauty and wisdom is killed.

This evil done, the death of Jesus, we learn, saves. Yet it does not save by just getting us past the terrible bit and then bringing us into light. It saves by showing the sin of this world, the sin of every one of us as being what it is. A terrible no to love. God brings into the light what sin is really about. The little denials, the petty confusions, the stupidities the self-righteousness and the pigheadedness, they are what have brought Jesus to His cross. They deny Him.

An example is how we love to demonise things, to make monsters of our fellows; think of how whenever there is a scandal in the health service or someone has been caught with their pants down, how the newspapers pour down indignation on them and we read the paper with shameful avidity. Pilate and co are the old us you might say. This death and way to death brings out the extent to which we as humans run from God, the way we are shaped by a denial of God, of wisdom, of beauty and of truth that is general. At its worst is the clear eyed defiance of God, the saying a direct no to God, eye to eye, the truth behind the story of the expulsion of Satan from heaven.

This is not to make you feel rotten or indeed feeling sorry for Jesus, not a Christian views that one. There is a way of understanding today as a matter of exposing the sin of focusing on God's wrathful response to the death of His Son, but it does not quite cut the mustard.

The key I think is that our 'no', our sin, our inadequate response to the holy One that is taken by the Holy One to Himself. He takes that 'no' into His own life, the holy one, the one who is with God from the first moment and so when He suffers and dies, He suffers and dies as one who is in unity with God, at the very core of His being. He dies as far from the life God desires for us. Jesus suffers what is too distant from that unity, does so because this is what the world in sin seeks, to be separate from God, on its own. In His abandonment, in those cries we have not heard today, we hear of that, but also that the Father does not as it were turn away from Him.

Yet this is done by Jesus, not so that we feel rotten, but so that unity with God shows itself for what it is. God shows us in this death what He is capable of, how He gets to the parts nothing else can reach. What Jesus suffers this day is something which arises out of that glory in John's term; He had with the Father ere the world was. The result of this Jesus is compassion and here it shows itself as not swerving from its path. The wonder is that it cannot be destroyed by this world's no, by the sin which is piled upon it, the wrath which meets beauty and goodness whenever they show themselves.

The terrible things of our own 'noes' to God, the things which go on, need not have been so. Sin, wrath our sins are not necessary, they are not what God intends. What He does is unity with Him, communion with Him, and with each other.

We do not face death with acceptance, and regard it with fear, but that is a death which is as if not marked by the death of Jesus. It is an end at once without sense, but it is also the way our noes to God, to His beauty and to His wisdom are changed. It is a putting to death which has to be without sense, angry and unjust, a death of wrath. He dies in order to do something to death. It is as if all our deaths are in the person of the one who dies. When we die and when we turn against life in our sin, then we may now look to that life as ones who die in hope of life.

This way shows that there is a way from the mess we make of ourselves, and that it makes possible a return from our follies and our sins. The places we make into places of despair are no longer places which are stamped with that mark.

You could say that Jesus death is the way God lays hold, grasps by the collar if you like the places where hope has been struck, where love has been sent packing. A Spanish writer once wrote that if you put love into the place where there is no love, you will draw love out. The world is changed today; fear and the like cannot win, the world is different. Today we know that no wrath, howsoever wild, that no wickedness, howsoever deep can match the glory, the unity and the compassion of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

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