

Good Friday 2009

During the first days of Holy Week, the tone of the readings grows ever darker. The prophet Isaiah foretells the coming of the Servant, the one who will not break the crushed reed or quench the wavering flame but will bring true justice instead. But as the week progresses, we will discover that the bringer of justice, the light of the nations, will also suffer, make no resistance, nor cover his face against insult and spittle. The Gospels that we have been reading also set the scene: the woman anointing Jesus's feet, the prediction of betrayal that so unsettles the disciples; and finally on the Wednesday, the preparations are put in place, not only for the Passover, but also for the treachery that leads us inevitably to today, Good Friday, when darkness covers the earth, and a man, who is also God, dies an agonising death on a cross, surrounded by jeering crowds who have come for the spectacle of a public execution.

Indeed, it would be very easy to say that we haven't improved much. I think all of us here have some idea of the things of which human beings are capable; indeed some have been directly affected by the wickedness and sinfulness of others. Deep in our hearts we know the difference between right and wrong. The reason we know this is because it comes from God himself, who orders all things for good, who creates us in his image and likeness, and makes us temples of his Holy Spirit. The tragedy, however, is that we mar that image in us, to a greater or lesser extent, through sinful acts great and small. We wilfully turn away from all that we know to be good. Indeed, I have heard that some think that the most terrible moment of the year is when they have to shout out in the Gospel: 'Crucify Him'.

If that were not enough, we often have to cope with private sorrows and times of bitterness and difficulty. There are some who have to spend much of their time looking after a sick relative, or coping with pain and illness, or mourning the loss of loved ones, or worrying about how to make ends meet. This, too, is a part of the human condition.

And yet it is also GOOD Friday. How can such a day be good? Because the Cross is a sign of hope. As the writer of the letter to the Hebrews says: 'For it is not as if we had a high priest who was incapable of sharing our weaknesses with us; but we have who was tempted in every way that we are, though he is without sin.' Though he is also God, Jesus is also truly man: a proper human being, capable of feeling and suffering all that we feel and suffer, able to love without counting the cost, able to forgive from the depths of his heart, able to promise paradise to the repentant thief. He does this in obedience to his heavenly Father: again in

our second reading, we read that 'he offered up prayer and entreaty, aloud and in silent tears, to the one who had the power to save him out of death, and he submitted so humbly that his prayer was heard.'

And there is the clue to the meaning of this day. In Jesus, we see the depths, indeed the heights, of God's love for us. God is not content to leave humanity in the degradation to which it can occasionally sink. Nothing and no one is beyond his reach: the vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives. He promises light to those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death. He promises rest and refreshment to those to those who carry heavy burdens.

Jesus knew this day was coming. He predicted it to his disciples. Obedient to his Father's will, raised up on the Cross, he accepts death and destroys the hold that death has over us. Even as we cry out 'crucify him', he forgives; even as we crown him with thorns, he loves; even as we nail him to the cross, he saves us out of death. As we clench our fists, he opens his arms. He takes upon himself everything and transforms it and gives it back as love. The vinegar that he is given to drink is the cup of human suffering and sin; in return, blood and water flow from his side: the Eucharist, his Body and Blood, and the life giving water of Baptism.

So, it is Good after all, for the love of God endures all things, even the bitterness of death itself.

The Cross does not have the last word. Pain does not have the last word. Death does not have the last word. Love does, life does, because love is stronger than death and the grave cannot contain the Crucified One.

In a little while, we come forward to kiss the cross, a ceremony that goes back to the earliest period in the Church's life. In kissing the Cross, we are rather like Peter who, having denied Christ, is given the chance to embrace him once more. Simon, son of John, do you love me? Yes, Lord, you know that I love you. Today, as we come to gaze on the Cross and to kiss its wood, those words are directed at us. The times we have denied Christ by our actions, hurt him by our own sins, by our words, are laid here: Our Lord asks us, do you love me? And, as you think of those words as you come forward, look at the Cross and reply: 'Yes, Lord, you know I love you' and kiss the Cross and know that you are loved back.