

Good Friday
14/04/2006

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 52:13-53:12
Psalms 22:1-18
Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9
John 18:1-19:42

Who is God, who is God for us?

One Palm Sunday a little troupe of actors came to the church where I was and put on a Passion play. They were ordinary people like us, but they gave a moving performance that concluded with the singing of *Were you there when they crucified my Lord?* It made me think afresh about how incomprehensible it is that this story of a cruel death involving treachery, rejection, and profound isolation should stand as core for the church. But it does. And the Cross remains a central symbol in worship, faith and theology because it is fundamental to our belief about who God is, and who God is for us. We believe this object of suffering, shame and the deepest humiliation - the Cross of Christ, reveals God. This notion runs so counter to other understandings of God that Christian theology speaks of God's revelation as indirect; a strange work which comes to us in a hidden way, understandable by faith rather than sight.

How are we to understand the revelation given in the Cross? There is a story in one of Shakespeare's plays in which two Greek Gods, on a journey, encounter a dead person. They do not go near the body, but hurry away for fear of contamination. The Gods from Mt Olympus must remain aloof and have no contact with death.

A different idea is to be found in the first part of the reading from Isaiah, which also involves a degree of separation between God and humanity. The Hebrews thought beauty was a sign of divine favour, but that ugliness indicated being smitten by God. The appearance of the Servant of God was marred - he was despised and rejected. People hid their faces from his ugliness - because it was thought to be a sign of God's rejection. What renders people speechless is that God lifted this one up.

Greek Gods could not dally with death. Hebrews thought that ugliness was a sign of God's rejection. But for Christians the humiliation, suffering and death signified in the Cross of Christ are central to our understanding of God as merciful, suffering love. The Cross signals that God is not aloof or hostile to the human realm. In the figure of the Beloved Son God has not been repelled by our mortality or ugliness, our lies or betrayals of love. God has embraced us. God has entered into the utter depths of human life in all its chaos, folly and distortions. We see this not only in the way the Son died, but also in his whole life, a life of humility in the service to God, directed to the poor and the poor in spirit, the suffering, the hungry and the marginalised. His was a life of the cross enacted and what it reveals is that God does not pass by on the other side. God chooses to be found where there is all manner of ugliness and humiliation, amongst the suffering, the treacherous and the dying. There is no dimension of life, no wounding or travail - no rebellion against God - from which God stands aside. This is God's love for the world, as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Therefore this dark day conveys an entirely different message to the one we would expect. This becomes a Good News day, for here we celebrate how, in all that happened in Jesus Christ, God chose to demonstrate suffering love towards all of humanity. The choice to do this flowed from the loving freedom of God's merciful heart. What we see here is not only that God is for us. We see what God is really like. The mysterious, ineffable one is at heart a source of undefeated mercy, which continues to bring forth new life where we would least expect to find it, in acts of new creation, forgiveness and reconciliation. This God does out of the sheer freedom of choosing to love us.

Nothing we do brings this about. Before we ask and without our deserving it, God does this. Good Friday is a statement that thinking we have to be godly, or holy, or beautiful or perfect, or politically correct, before God will have anything to do with us does not count. On this day we learn that, despite our betrayal of life and our refusal to love, regardless of our weakest moment and our complete mystification, we are embraced and loved. God chose to keep company with the fallen. That is why this otherwise sad and gloomy day can have a different mood. There is life here. It is not life without pain. It is life in which, to a profound extent, the pain is shared by another. By entering life and death in this way, God overcame death for us, which is why the skull and cross bones are under Jesus's feet. What God did in freedom for us is the basis of our freedom. Right here our life can take a new turn and find a new meaning. Good Friday sets us free to come closer to our own pain and struggle. On this day we see that even as encounter our own deep experiences of life and death, we are still held - by hands that know the wood of the Cross and the agony of the nails and spear. This is Good Friday because on this day we see God chose to go with us and stay with us, no matter what the cost.