

We Preach Christ Crucified

Sermon for Good Friday, April 15, 2022

Readings: Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Hebrews 10:16-25; John 18:1-19:42; Psalm 22

Sermon text: We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. 1 Cor. 23-25

It is good to be here today, and I want to thank Father Dell for the invitation. It is good to gather, retell the great story, and join together in the worship of our mighty God. It has been a few years. So to make up for lost time I've brought three sermons, a bit of a Baptist fire and brimstone one, a Presbyterian exegetical one, and of course an Anglican Episcopalian conclusion. But before you settle in for a good snooze, let's try some primal scream therapy. Anybody else want to scream about the state of the world today?

So, I am not alone.

In good company (or at least among fellow inmates) and because it is Good Friday, let me lead a brief tour of the dismal state of the world and the perilous state of our souls.

Of course, you do not need me to tell you the world is in crisis. The four horsemen of the apocalypse—plague, pestilence, war and famine—are on the move. We are two years into the first, a global pandemic, and witnessing the third—a land war in Europe no less, with bombing of civilians, mass refugees, WWII scenes we thought were gone for good. The only end will be destruction in Ukraine and depression and pariah status for Russia, with thousands upon thousands killed, millions homeless, and massive international disruptions—and that is if the war remains confined to its current battlefield. But the consequences won't be so contained: oil and gas prices of course, but food shortages and famine in parts of the world as well. The third horseman. This leads of course to more migrations, unrest, civil war. The only thing missing is a locust swarm, pestilence—but fear not, we have plenty of natural disasters to contend with, from fire and flood and species extinction—the accumulating consequences of climate change.

We are also facing homegrown problems—political polarization, rising crime and craziness, deaths of despair, rising inequality, immigration stalemate, a feeling that the virtues of civility and compromise are waning while the extremes on

right and left are demonizing each other with increasingly effective social media tools.

So here we are, in church, a fine flock of good respectable people. Perhaps we feel able to view all this with some detachment, some sense of moral superiority. But then I recall that those who came to see John the Baptist at the river Jordan were probably good respectable people too. And John the Baptist opened his preaching to those gathered at the Jordan to see him with the greeting, “You brood of vipers, what brings you to seek repentance?” Just as we all joined the part of the crowd in the reading of the Passion and shouted “crucify him!” so we are rightly included in the harsh assessment of John. We are all sinners, disobedient to the commands of God, complicit in the injustices of the world—even through what we eat, what we wear, our consumer devices. Not to mention all the sorts of sins that Paul mentions in the first chapter of Romans: greed, idolatry, anger, sexual immorality, gossip, malice—a long list. And if you are not on that list go on and read chapter two: those who judge others are guilty themselves, for no one is perfect, and to boast of your virtue is the worst kind of pride—as Jesus illustrated in his parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector.

So yes, we are all sinners. We are all part of a world that has grievously sinned against God. We have not followed the three great commandments of God—love of God, love of neighbor, and the first commandment, given to Adam in the garden, care and stewardship of earth. And if Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden for the trespass of forbidden fruit, what punishment are we liable for for all this mayhem, violence and desecration of earth? If God is just—as we believe—we cannot say it would be unjust for God to unleash another flood in order to cleanse the world of our violence—though this time we seem to be doing the work ourselves. As we stand convicted, the classic move is to breast our breast, tear our clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes and plead for mercy. But, since we are Episcopalians, let’s just do a light tap three times with our fist on our chest.

Good. The Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God part of the sermon is over. No need for an altar call. Now let’s do some exegesis, mostly of Paul but let me start with Isaiah.

“My thoughts are your thoughts, my ways are not your ways, says the Lord,” according to the prophet (Isaiah 55:6-11). “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways. As rain and snow fall from the heavens and return not again but water the earth, bringing forth life and giving growth, seed for sowing and bread for eating, so is my word that goes forth from my mouth, it will not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

And what is this Word but Jesus of Nazareth, the Anointed One, the Messiah, the Christ of God, who we believe is the Son of God eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God?

Paul in his letter to the Philippians (2:5-8) has this amazing passage that begins, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”

Follow me here. We see in this passage a progression that we also see in the life of Christ. The Incarnation, the first emptying, then the proclamation and the healing, the gathering and teaching the disciples—who included the women who stayed faithfully by the cross—all of this holiness and wonderworking that culminated in a triumphal entrance into Jerusalem. But then after Palm Sunday we see a steady emptying out of his power and claims to earthly glory. His refusal of violence, his refusal to answer the trumped up charges against him, his willingness to be beaten and spit on and called a liar and fraud, his submission even to being nailed to the cross, punishment reserved for slaves and criminals. A submission so complete that it seems he even felt isolated and alone from the Father for he quoted Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” A complete emptying out of self.

And for what?

Why didn't he save himself, as those who ridiculed him on the cross challenged him to do, if he was the son of God? Why didn't he call on the legions of angels—or earlier, all those who had cheered him on—and rise up, burst the nails, grow to giant size and, like Samson wielding the jawbone of an ass, wield the cross like a scythe, to wipe out his enemies. Clean house, kill the Romans and those who had betrayed him, and then, with the remnant left, institute the kingdom of God he proclaimed was near, at hand? Why not?

Love. As Paul writes in Romans (5:6-8): “You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

That was the plan. And it may not make sense to us as we think on the human plane—looking for signs and wonders, proofs and demonstrations of divinity,

like the Jews and Greeks Paul mentions. But what to us looks like weakness is God's strength. "For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor. 25). Jesus Christ in his very submission and self-sacrifice was taking the fight to a different level. His emptying out of the form and power of divinity allowed him to take onto himself the sins of humanity. It was divine jujitsu, yin over yang, water over rock, non-violence over violence, love over hate. "We were dead," Paul writes in Colossians (2:13-15), "dead in trespasses, when God made us alive in Christ, forgiving our trespasses, erasing the record against us with its claims of justice. He set this aside nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it."

Here's where I gesture with a martial arts move of flipping someone and nailing upward.

What a wonder! Christ crucified was none other than "Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." On the cross, he was defeating the rulers of the world—and that means Satan and all the forces of evil that conspire against God and creation. They thought they had him, had him literally nailed down. But in the very process of dying he defeated death. The tomb could not contain him—here's Paul again, also from Colossians: "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Christ, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." You see in Christ the fullness of God dwelled, even though he had given up the form and appearance of God. And so in the power of God, filled with the great love of God, Christ descended to the dead and released the captives there. And then of course he was raised from the dead on the third day.

I know what what you're tempted to say, it starts with "A." But let us not get ahead of ourselves. Let us stay at the foot of the cross, and gaze with wonder and adoration at this great mystery, that through the emptying out of his hard *yang* power, and through the yielding *yin* power of love and self-sacrifice, Christ was secretly reconciling humanity and all creation to God, forgiving us, offering a sufficient—the only possible sufficient—sacrifice on our behalf, restoring us to the possibility of peace and eternal life. Opening the door to heaven and eternal life. Preparing a place for us. All through God's freely given love, not justice but pure grace. Amazing grace.

You still with me? It is a lot to get your mind around. Paul is very profound on this subject. And it is still a great mystery, the way God redeemed the world through the cross of Christ. But there is one part of the sermon left. Let me check my watch. OK, time for a short Episcopalian bow to tie the two other

threads together: how does the sacrifice of Christ on the cross connect to the crisis in the world and the country and the perilous state of our sinful souls?

Simple. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:5). Practice the self-giving, self-emptying power of God to bring about reconciliation. Forgive as you are forgiven. Trust in God and follow the Way of love. And obey the three great commandments. Love God, love your neighbor and take care of this precious earth we have been in trust. If we do that, and tell and show others the power of it, God will do the rest. It may take another two thousand years, it may take a whole new creation. But there will be a new creation, a redeemed people, a restored harmony. And since we have been made part of it through Christ, let's start living that way even now.

Let the people say, Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins, Rector
Grace Church, Millbrook, NY
Preached at St Peter's, Lithgow