

On this night Christians of all traditions around the world are remembering the death of our Lord Jesus Christ on a Cross outside the city of Jerusalem nearly two thousand years ago.

This evening, in that extended reading from St John we have read of Jesus before Pilate. He is sent to the Cross as a result of the envy of the Temple establishment and the expediency of Pilate. In the shambles that passed for a trial we have heard allegations of blasphemy, of sedition. His enemies get their way and Jesus is condemned to death. Tonight we have read of his death upon the Cross.

That Cross has come to be seen as an event of eternal significance. Caiaphas may have thought he was just disposing of a trouble maker; Pilate may have seen this as just one more troublesome incident in this troublesome province on the edge of the Roman Empire.

In the light of the resurrection of Jesus, the Cross is seen to be of eternal significance, transcending barriers of time, an instrument of redemption. Seen in the light of the resurrection, in the context of the Old Testament, the events of that first Good Friday came to be seen as the climax of God's redeeming work, that in the person of Jesus on the Cross God suffers with and for suffering and sinful humanity.

Jesus, the same Jesus who died upon the Cross and who was raised triumphant on the third day, is recognised as the Christ, the Son of God. At the heart of the proclamation of the Gospel is the Cross of Christ,

"a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles; but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

(I Cor 1:23-24).

There is something in the Cross that I have always found compelling. The Cross, Jesus dying on the Cross, both eludes my understanding and yet meets my deepest needs. It is both an expression of God's amazing love but also God's judgement.

I find the way that I begin to enter into my own understanding is by holding together a number of contrasts.

The love and the judgement.
The weakness and the power.
The sacrifice and the power of the Cross.

I begin by looking at Jesus - not just a teacher, not just a good man. As we read in St John's account of the Last Supper; "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." To look upon Jesus is to look upon the face of God.

We confess in the Nicene Creed:

We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ
eternally begotten of the Father
one in being with the Father

The relationship of the Father and the Son one of perfect communion. It is in the light of this relationship of perfect communion that I want to reflect on the sacrifice and the triumph of the Cross; on that cry of dereliction, that cry of utter loneliness, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?": on that

cry of total victory, "It is finished!" The job is done, the victory won.

The words, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" have always spoken very powerfully to me, it underlines for me a pain that goes to the very heart of the God head as the intimate relationship between Father and Son is stretched to breaking point. Jesus who felt so at one with the Father, dies totally alone, God forsaken: 'My God! My God! Why have you abandoned me?' The pain of the Father. Too often our theories of atonement have cast the Father at Calvary as a remote figure, needing only to be appeased. But we must remember words of Jesus to Nicodemus, 'God so loved the world that he gave his Son' and the description of God we have in the 1st Letter of John, 'God is love'.

The Father gives up the Son. Not only does the Father drift out of sight of the Son, the Son drifts out of sight of the Father. There is, as I say, a pain that goes to the very heart of God.

Would you at this point turn to hymn 224 in your books.

How deep the Father love for us,
how vast beyond all measure,
that he should give his only Son
to make a wretch his treasure!
How great the pain of searing loss:
the Father turns his face away
as wounds which mar the chosen one
bring many sons to glory!

There is also the triumph of that Cross as Jesus cries out at the last, "It is finished!" The veil of the Temple torn in two, the barriers between man and

God, man and man crumble. It is in the light of this that we read those wonderful words of Isaiah:

"Surely he took up our infirmities
and carried our sorrows,
yet we considered him stricken by God,
smitten by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed. " *Isaiah 53:4-5*

The triumph and the sacrifice - the sacrifice part of the triumph and the triumph part of the sacrifice.

I spoke earlier of the cross as eluding my understanding yet meeting my deepest needs. That means at some stage I must engage with the Cross, I must receive the Cross. By that I mean that there must come a point when I see the Cross not just as an event that happened but one of personal relevance to me. That I see Jesus on the Cross not just dying for man in general but for me. That I see him not just bearing the burden of sin in general but my sin; that mine is the sin he bore, mine is the death he died.

There is something intensely personal in all this. Let us hear again the words from our lesson from Isaiah:

⁴ Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
⁵ But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed. *Isa 53:4-5*

This is love and love is essentially personal, relational. There is a lover and a beloved. There is something in the Cross that speaks to something deep within me that prompts me, the beloved, to respond to the love of my lover. And so in the darkness of Calvary there is forged a new beginning, new life, new hope in faith. So we confess in the Eucharist, as we remember his death and resurrection:

dying he destroyed our death
rising he restored our life
Lord Jesus come in glory.

And we dedicate ourselves to go out in the name of our beloved to think, to speak, to act as he would have us do among the people he has placed us with, in the situation he has placed us in, in the place and time that he has placed us in that God's love for this world may continue to be known in each generation.

Turning once again to hymn 224, verse 3

I will not boast in anything,
no gifts, no power, no wisdom;
but I will boast in Jesus Christ,
his death and resurrection.
Why should I gain from his reward?
I cannot give an answer;
but this I know with all my heart,
his wounds have paid my ransom.