

During our joint Holy Week Services with the Methodist Church in Sutton, Sonia and I chose to centre our thoughts around Mrs Alexander's Hymn, 'There is a green hill far away'. For one thing hymns are very much part of our spiritual diet. Hymns help both express and shape our thinking. We express our faith in our worship, in our liturgies. What you have in a good hymn is a combination of good basic theology simply expressed in poetry, sung to a memorable tune. I often think hymns can be more powerful than sermons in developing our spiritual formation. The combination of poetry and music mean the words, the thoughts stay in our minds long after the most eloquent of sermons. We can mull over the words, consciously, even subconsciously.

I just want to stay with the hymn 'There is a green hill far away' and recap some of our thoughts:

We may not know, we cannot tell,
what pains he had to bear,
but we believe it was for us
he hung and suffered there.

Some years ago we were in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is covered with sites associated with the death and resurrection of Jesus. The authenticity of some is questionable but there are some of which there is little doubt, one of which would be the site of the High Priest's House. On the basis of the best archaeological evidence available, historians are confident this is the actual site. One of my most vivid memories of that trip was that of a visit to the house of Caiaphas. Below the house, archaeologists found a series of cells; adjacent to the cells was a room almost certainly used for flogging. Everything was so well designed – the posts to which the prisoners would be tied.

As we stood in that place, certainly very close to the spot where Jesus would have been held and abused by his captors, there was an almost palpable sense of awe. Our guide handed me a card on which was printed the psalm we read earlier (Psalm 88) and asked me to read it to our group. after a while we

walked out in silence. As one member of our group said to me later, that place really brought home the stark reality of it all.

Of all the words of Jesus from the Cross, the one that has been most crucial in my own developing thinking is that cry of dereliction: ‘My God! My God! Why have you abandoned me?’ I often think that in our reflections on the events of these last few days in the life of Jesus, that we have almost unconsciously flattened the emotions. Our art, our liturgies almost have the effect of taming, sanitising the whole episode. We have lost sight of the exuberance of that first Palm Sunday. During our time in Jerusalem, we saw a young boy being brought to the Temple Wall for his Bar Mitzvah – he was carried shoulder high, his friends and family singing as he was brought to the Temple Wall and he was given the scriptures to read. We have lost sight of the fury of the Temple authorities when Jesus cleared the traders from the Temple forecourts, the reality of a mob baying for blood (who can forget those awful scenes from Belfast when two soldiers were dragged from their car and beaten to death) and of course the barbarity of a Roman crucifixion. I think that is why the visit to the cells under the High priest’s House made such an impact on our group.

That cry out of the darkness of that fateful Friday underlines for me what we have been referring to during the week as 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.

It is in the light of this that I re-read those familiar, often quoted, almost hackneyed words, ‘God so loved the world he gave his Son’; that I begin to understand what John meant as he wrote, ‘god is love’. For we find the ultimate expression of that in the pain of the God-head at Calvary – Jesus’ forsakenness on the Cross, the surrender of the Son, the love of the Father which does everything, gives everything, suffers everything.

Truly:

We may not know, we cannot tell,
what pains he had to bear,

And why? Why this suffering and heartache in the heart of God?

but we believe it was for us
he hung and suffered there.

There is something intensely personal in all this. I think of 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*

Words that call to mind Paul writing to the Romans words we will often use in the context of a funeral service:

If God is for us, who is against us? ³² He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?

.....
No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. *Romans 8:31,32,37-39*

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.

O dearly, dearly has he loved,
and we must love him too,
and trust in his redeeming blood,
and try his works to do.