

Good Friday, Year C, 2022

Isaiah 52.13-end of 53; John 18.1-end of 19, Psalm 22

A striking feature of the Passion Narratives in general is how Jesus is passed around. He is taken to Annas (a former High Priest) by the Temple police, he is taken to Caiaphas (the High Priest that year), he is taken to Pilate (the Roman Governor of Palestine), he is taken to Herod Antipas (the Roman vassal king of Galilee), he is taken back to Pilate. He is taken to the cross by a cohort of Roman soldiers, where he is crucified on the orders of the Roman governor the symbol of worldly power egged on by the Hebrew religious authorities resident in Jerusalem. "A murderer they save, the Prince of life they slay."

What strikes us is how God in Jesus allows this 'being passed around' to happen from the moment he is taken by the Temple police and finally taken to Golgatha, the Place of the Skull to be crucified. John the Evangelist gives the impression that Jesus is in control contrary to our human perceptions of what is happening. There are moments when Jesus bears up to what is being said and done to him, but they are few.

What I have outlined above is one way of coming to appreciate Paul's famous few words from his letter to the church in Philippi, of Jesus emptying himself, of Jesus humbling himself, and of Jesus becoming obedient even to the point of death. (Philippians 2.1-12, esp. 7, 8) The emptying is not only spiritual, but it is also and firstly physical, as the Passion Narratives remind us. Along with those who looked on, we see a soldier piercing "his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out." This picture of Jesus' body fluids being released, water and blood, reminds us, as it has done many a Christian across the ages, of the prophet Ezekiel's vision of the water flowing from the threshold of the Temple. Those waters that flow to the east will make the stagnant water fresh. It is a picture of the Dead Sea, becoming a place of abundant life flourishing with fauna and flora.

Let us stay at the foot of the cross thinking about Paul's insight of God in Jesus emptying himself. Rewinding a little to see Jesus breathe his last. It has been suggested that Jesus' last breath not only signifies his death accompanied by the darkness covering the whole world and the curtain of the Temple being rent in two, but that this last breath, the *giving up* of his spirit is to be likened to the *giving* of the Holy Spirit. In this moment, the death of Jesus, the new creation is being born and it is born by Jesus *giving* the Spirit and his dying. As Jesus says, "I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." (John 12.27)

A number of commentators do not only see man's inhumanity to man, the death of the one who came to bring life in all its fullness, sin conquered, death destroyed, but also how this final breath on and from the cross is given up to Mary, the mother of Jesus, John, the Beloved Disciple, as well as Mary Magdalene and the wife of Cleopas. In John, you might say, this is the moment in which the Church is born. It is not only born through Mary and John being given to one another, a purely human thing, if it were not for the giving of life by the breath/the Spirit that gives life.

The last point is speculative, but set in context, in the context of Jesus giving his life for the world, of God emptying himself through humility and obedience (actively, intentionally, and in accordance with the Father's will) as embedded in John's gospel it has a ring of truth. 'In our darkness, you are our light, in our weakness you are strength' this paradox at the heart of a prayer, is at the heart of our faith. Things are not as they seem.

God gives completely and in Christ of himself and he gives to the last. He gives his body. He gives his body fluids. He gives his breath. He gives his Spirit. This picture from the cross of self-giving to the last tells us much about the God whom we worship and adore, to whom we bow the head and bend the knee, as we will do shortly in a liturgical form giving expression outwardly to the faith in us that cannot be seen. God gives abundantly and we out of our new won freedom, a freedom won for us, are invited into giving abundantly presaged by the gift given by Nicodemus, who “brings a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds.”

Abundance is one of the themes of John’s gospel. Nicodemus’ response is an abundant response. A prior material response points to his death as another Mary takes a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard and wipes his feet with her hair. Jesus says of this sacrificial giving, “Leave her alone. She bought it\* so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.” Nicodemus’ abundant giving points to another of John’s themes of sovereignty, of kingship. And the new tomb in which he is laid reminds me of the tombs that were hewn for Pharaohs of old.

Jesus’ abundant self-giving has inspired many a Christian to do the same in the service of Christ that their lives may faithfully witness to the one who brings life out of death, who is for those who believe the assurance of sins forgiven. This is what we learn as Christians: God is forever bringing life out of death. God’s generosity is something we will ever only begin to have an inkling of.

A brief excursion: I point here as a pastor to Jesus’ example of humbling, of self-emptying and obedience leading to extraordinary lives lived within the Body of Christ, but our following must always be tempered by the knowledge that it is God who saves, not us. It is God who has takes our sins upon himself. It is God who brings life out of death. Why, so that we may not exchange the grace of God, His life-giving Holy Spirit for the work of mere mortals, regardless of how inspiring, how active and tireless their/our faith might be. With Nathanael we must always be pointing to Jesus saying, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”

As we look over what I have said I am reminded of the sheer physicality of what is taking place beginning with how Jesus is passed around for the powers of this world to see and to do with him as they like. The reactions are varied from being puzzled by this man, as Pilate is, to wanting to be rid of him because his presence, his teaching, his authority are understood to threaten the status quo: the habitual collaboration between the Jewish and Roman authorities. Each naturally always seeking their advantage in the relationship. Fear of an insurrection leads Pilate to go against his better judgement and thereby fail to uphold justice or allow Roman Law to apply to one who was not a Roman citizen. Wood, hair, blood, crown of thorns, whips, hands slapping, vinegar, breath, myrrh and aloes, body water, a lance piercing his side, nails driven into his wrists and the ankles of his feet... Theology can quickly lose itself so easily in abstractions failing to remain connected with the nitty gritty and the messiness of lives lived.

The core sin as understood by John the Evangelist is unbelief. And this unbelief, the lack of trust and faith in Jesus, will make mutual love impossible. Those who hear me preach regularly will know that I am fond of quoting the Psalms, as they have found a home in me, as they have done in many a Christian and Jew, and indeed in Jesus himself. In the light of pain, suffering and death, as well as the confusions of the world and the crises of this present moment, all very real, we with Jesus are called to put our trust in God the Father as he did on Good Friday. I wonder – did Jesus

hold up these words to himself as he gave up his last breath? “With the Lord on my side I do not fear. What can mortals do to me?” (Psalm 118.6) We are not to drink from the waters of this world, but from the waters of eternal life.

I conclude with some words from an Easter hymn this side of Easter, Jesus having breathed his last. “The strife is o'er, the battle done” and “death's mightiest powers have done their worst...” The powers of death are legion, some of them residing in us, they have done their worst. This is what we see today. This is what we must grasp. As Jesus says, “‘It is finished.’ Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.” He gave up his Spirit that we may live, Deo Gratias. Till the end he is passed around, but at the end, the battle done, it was those who loved him who laid him in a new tomb. They were for him at the end that was no end.

Patrick Curran, Good Friday 2022