

*Three dimensions of the cross*

There are two ways that you can look at the execution that was taking place on the hill of the Skull outside Jerusalem on that Friday afternoon. You can see it as just one more sad death, the brutal slaying of someone who was viewed as a threat and had to be done away with. And there is nothing unusual about that. It happens all the time always has and always will. The human race is good at that. But you can also see Christ's crucifixion as far more than this, as Christians have always done. To the eye of faith this was no ordinary, run-of-the mill death. This was different and that is why it continues to be remembered 21 centuries after it happened. This grisly event on that Friday afternoon when the sky turned dark is seen as Christians as central to our faith, central to God's dealings with the human race. We claim that in some way this event was crucial to reconciling to God a world that had become alienated and estranged. We claim that this death was necessary for our salvation – that by his death we are saved. So what is that all about? How does the death of Christ save? How is it that he was wounded for our transgression and by his stripes we are healed?

Well, tomes could be written about this and we still wouldn't comprehend it but today, on the Good Friday, I want to consider Luke's account of Jesus' death and try to get some handle on what was happening in that dreadful place on that terrible day. I want to consider three dimensions of the cross and how it deals with sin. And Christians of course are accused of being obsessed with sin and sometimes we have been - but perhaps Good Friday is one occasion when we need to talk about it. And if anyone thinks it's outdated or fanatical to talk about sin today one must wonder what planet they are living on.

So we turn firstly to one of the cries uttered by Jesus from the cross, the words, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.' And what we find here is that God deals with sin by forgiving it, by not counting our trespasses against us. And perhaps the best way to think of this is that on the cross God was taking the very worst that humanity could throw at him - and forgiving us. God in Christ, after all, has come into the world, reaching out to us in love, laying aside his glory in order to become one of us and one with us, extending God's embrace - and we have risen up in spite against God and God's anointed, Jesus of Nazareth, hounding him to death. That is the worst we could possibly do. What happened on Good Friday reveals the dark side of human nature: or capacity for injustice, our blindness to the truth when it stares us in the face, our resistance to the things that make for peace. But above all Good Friday reveals the human race's most profound antipathy and hostility to God. And what does God do in response? Well, God forgives. 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' He forgives us at that point where we are most wicked, not laying our sins to our charge. And note carefully: no-one was repenting. No-one was confessing. No-one was standing at the cross asking for forgiveness. But God's forgiveness does not depend upon repentance or confession of sin. It does not depend upon sacrifice and no-one needs to die in order that we might be forgiven. God forgives because God is compassionate and merciful. God is like that.

That, however, is not the end of the story, for there is more to dealing with sin than simply forgiveness. For all that it is forgiven, sin constitutes a barrier between us and God, for God is not only compassionate. God is also holy and sin, even when it is forgiven, taints us and clashes with God's searing holiness. And that means that sin must be dealt with in some way – forgiveness is not enough. And here we are directed to another detail in Luke's account of the crucifixion where we read that just before he died the curtain of the temple was torn in two. This was the curtain that hung at the very heart of the temple, what was called 'the holy of holies' where God was believed to dwell, the very epicentre of God's presence. And no-one could enter the holy of holies except the high priest once every year and only after ritual purification and cleansing, because that's what God's holiness requires. Sin, even forgiven sin, is incompatible with the holiness of God and so must be dealt with. And the Bible speaks of sin being covered, covered over; it speaks of sin being removed from God's presence and God's sight; and it speaks of us being cleansed. In the Old Testament all this took place in various rituals and sacrifices on what was called the day of Atonement when, every year, Israel's sin was dealt with. And the New Testament is bold to see the death of Christ in these terms, as a sacrificial offering, the lamb taking away the sins of the world - and by his blood we are cleansed.

So God in his compassion forgives us for our sins as Jesus cries 'Father, forgive them...'; and God in his holiness makes a way for us to draw near to him, as the curtain in the temple is torn in two. But there is, however, another side to sin that must be dealt with. And here we turn again to our passage and we read that at about noon darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon and the sun's light failed. So what is that all about?

Well what we see here is a darkness that extinguishes the light, but there is more to this darkness than meets the eye. Back in the previous chapter of Luke when Jesus is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane he says to those who have come to arrest him, 'this is your hour, and the power of darkness'. This darkness is a power, and it has its hour: it's the power of evil, a power that is at work in the world and that resists God and that destroys and that lies behind sin. And Jesus has encountered this power in his ministry when he has cast out demons, and he encountered it right at the beginning of his ministry when he was in the wilderness and the voice tempted him to deviate from the path he was called to follow. It's the power that is called Satan, or the devil. In Mark's Gospel is it called 'The Strong Man' who Jesus must bind and whose house he must plunder. And we may use mythological and poetic language to describe this power but it is real nevertheless and we see it at work in our world as much as ever. And here it engulfs Christ on the cross in the darkness that descends, and Christ yields to it and allows it to exhaust itself in him and in so doing overcomes it. And so Christ becomes what was known in the early church as Christus Victor, Christ who has striven with the darkness and prevailed.

On the cross, therefore, we see three dimensions: the compassion of God who forgives, unconditionally; and the holiness of God which covers sin and bears it away; and the sovereignty of God by which sin is a defeated foe whose days are numbered. And all these combine in that tortured figure on the Hill of the Skull. And we watch. In the words of the song we heard sung, we look up. We see the dogs full-belied in their spite as they bite, shedding the blood of the lamb. But this is more than just one more sickening and tragic death. Here forgiveness is enacted and sin is dealt with.

He was wounded for our transgressions, and by his stripes we are healed, and the Lord had laid on him the iniquity of us all. Amen, and to God be glory forever.