

The Pathos and The Pity

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Friday 18 April 2014, by David Gill. The readings for Good Friday were Isaiah 52:13-53:12 and St John 19:1-16

So he dies. Rejected, mocked, tortured and betrayed. Alone, abandoned by his friends, seemingly forsaken by his God, he dies. And in that death, the Christ becomes utterly, indisputably, irrevocably and for all time one of us.

It's a pity, I sometimes think, that the message about God becoming human is all mixed up with angels, stars, wise men, shepherds and a baby in a cattle stall. Great material, all of it, for Hollywood, but not exactly life as you and I experience it. The festivities of Christmas speak of a Jesus who, whatever else he might have been, certainly is not recognizable as one who started life like us.

Maybe we should build our understanding of the incarnation, instead, around the events of Holy Week – betrayal, pain, and especially that soul-shattering cry of utter despair: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

With that cry, Jesus leaves the mists of distant history. He abandons the security of the stained glass window. He discovers, in his bones, the terrible emptiness of life when the gods have fallen silent, when meaning is no more. With that cry, he becomes one with the children of Auschwitz and Afghanistan. He becomes one with the Stolen Generation, with the HIV/AIDS generation, with the detention centre generation, with all the lost generations that will ever be. He becomes, decisively and for all time, one of us. He descends into the very depths of hell.

And the awesome mystery of the incarnation, of the outreaching love of God in Christ, is complete.

The writer Graham Greene left the world more than good stories laced with fascinating characters. Through those stories, those characters, he helped us see ourselves, the mysteries of life and death, the Christian faith itself, with greater clarity. And he gave us some riveting one-liners. One of the most memorable occurs near the end of Greene's novel *Brighton Rock*. An elderly priest has been

talking with a deeply troubled girl trying to make sense of her chaotic life. His punchline has haunted me ever since I first read it.

“You can’t conceive, my child, nor can I or anyone,” says the old man, “the ... appalling ... strangeness of the mercy of God”.

That divine mercy is at its strangest, its most appalling, in the drama we relive today.

Twenty-six years ago, almost to the day, I had to cope with another death that was rather more recent. For in Holy Week 1988 I had to attend an inquest into the death of a friend.

The purpose of an inquest, of course, is to arrive at an answer to the question: why did this person die? It sounds straightforward enough. In fact, such an exercise may be far from straightforward, when every answer you find pushes you back to another question.

- Why did Andrew die? The medical report was quite clear: drowning.
- But why did he drown? Well, somehow he got into Sydney Harbour.
- But why? Well, no evidence of violence, so he fell or he jumped.
- Yes, but why would he have fallen? Why would he have jumped? Well

So it goes. Every answer gives rise to yet more questions. As the quest for understanding reaches back and back, at some point in this chain-reaction of bafflement what began as a question of cause turns into the larger question of meaning. Then the answer becomes even more elusive.

What would my response have been if the coroner had fired that larger question in my direction? If he’d said: Mr Gill, from the perspective of the Church, why did this tragedy happen?

I would have had no answer. Yes, I know some of my sisters and brothers in the faith would have been ready with answers – easy words about the will of God, all

bolstered by biblical quotes. But that response is too neat, too facile. It does justice neither to the depth of the human tragedy nor to the even greater depth of the divine compassion.

There is no answer to the “why?” I faced then. Just as there is no answer to the question we all face, now, as we gaze once again upon “the appalling strangeness” of the cross. Indeed, this cross stands for all time as the great cosmic question mark, gathering into itself all the world’s inexplicable tragedy and brokenness, all our bafflement and despair.

The modern ecumenical movement is enlarging our spiritual perception by, among other things, helping us see how great is that human tragedy, how varied are the heartbreaks, how many the ways in which the cross brings into laser-sharp focus the pathos of all people in all places at all times.

One of the most interesting publications of the World Council of Churches is a book entitled *On a Friday Noon: Meditations Under the Cross*. Produced by Hans-Ruedi Weber, it compresses between two covers an astonishingly varied collection of artists’ attempts to portray the meaning of the cross in different times and social settings. There is “The Tortured Christ” from Brazil, “The Powerless Christ” from Mexico, “The Christ of the Asphalt Jungle” from Switzerland, “The Tubercular Christ” hanging in the chapel of a TB hospital in France.

Visit the chapel of the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva and you see a cross topped not with a crown of thorns but with rusty, flesh-tearing barbed wire. It was the gift of a former political prisoner, his way of expressing thanks to the churches that had stood by him throughout his suffering. But also his attempt to show what the cross had come to mean to him during his months of imprisonment and torture.

The pathos of all people everywhere. Yet the cross is about much more than pathos. That “much more” is echoed in a movingly simple prayer of Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the twentieth century’s greatest theologians. “Have pity on us,”

he wrote, “for only your infinite pity is adequate for the infinite pathos of human existence”.

Infinite pathos – and infinite pity. Both are focused here, in the drama we relive today. In the appalling strangeness of the cross, we glimpse humanity’s infinite pathos embraced by the strong arms of God’s infinite pity.

I don’t know why Andrew died. But -- I do know that when the waves of Sydney Harbour closed over him, God’s was the first heart to break.

I don’t know why those kids in Syria, those villagers in Afghanistan, those people in the Central African Republic, are going through their assorted versions of hell. But – I do know that in hell with them is one whose hands bear the scars of the cross.

I don’t know why families fall apart, why friends become enemies, why dreams come crashing down. But – I do know that in the midst of the world’s tears are the tears of a God who weeps with us and for us.

I don’t know why on this day of cosmic madness the Son of God was crucified. But – I do know that this is not the end of the story.

For on Sunday we will gather, with millions of fellow-believers right around the world, to praise one who will meet us from the other side of death, transforming our mortal darkness with his dazzling grace, nourishing our mortal weakness at his table of life, drawing us all to find in him our life, our hope, our healing and our peace.

To him be praise for ever.

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