

Holy Week: God So Loved the World

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 1 April 2012, by David Gill. Readings for Palm Sunday were Philippians 2:5-11 and St Mark 11:1-11.

Palm Sunday. The beginning of the end.

Jesus enters the holy city of his people. In the next few days he will share a last meal with his followers. He will know despair. He will be betrayed, arrested, condemned, denied, mocked, executed. Come Friday we will gaze again upon the horror of the cross.

And we will face the question: what does it all mean? What does this life and death signify? What, ultimately, is the Jesus drama all about?

Two Sundays ago the lectionary had congregations around the world listening to a reading from St John's gospel that included a verse we know well. John 3:16 – *“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life”*. You will be stirred by those same words on Friday afternoon, when the St Stephen's choir sings Stainer's oratorio *The Crucifixion*.

That sentence is one of the most powerful affirmations in the whole of the Bible. Martin Luther called it “the gospel in a nutshell”, and indeed it is.

I invite you to allow John 3:16 to inform your search for meaning during this holy week. Let us reflect on the verse now, taking it step by step.

God so loved ...

God? There are so many pictures of God. So many arguments about God. We live in the midst of a veritable cacophony of god talk. Let's try to block out the worst of all that god noise.

Ignore the God who is used against others as a political weapon, whether by Islamists or by Christians, whether in the Middle East or in the United States or, sometimes, in Australia too. Avoid like the plague the God who is invoked to foster hatred, to legitimize trampling on someone else's human rights, or – in

what is surely the ultimate blasphemy – to muster a cheer squad for one side or the other in time of war.

Leave aside for a moment the many other pictures of God – the merciless judge, the all-knowing police officer, the absentee landlord, the cosmic power that kicked everything off and then went missing, the puppeteer pulling strings that make us jump, the indifferent deity who just doesn't give a damn.

Leave all that aside. And focus on this one staggering claim: God, the ultimate reality, is compassion unbounded, mercy without limit, caring without end. God loves.

... the world ...

A couple of weeks ago I was reading a novel set in the 18th century, and hence well laced with 18th century views of religion. The lead character had no doubt about who God loves: Protestants, more precisely Anglican Protestants, even more precisely English Anglican Protestants! Everyone else was beyond the pale. Fortunately, the ecumenical movement has dragged us, screaming, a long way since then.

But we have still a way to go. The God of our instincts remains too small. We still love making God in our own image. We still like thinking he smiles on people like, well, like us. But that's not the gospel. God so loved the *world*. Not just the Jews or the Christians, the young or the old, Middle Easterners or Anglo-Saxons, the religious or the righteous, the straight or the successful. But this whole crazy, bewildering, mixed up, wonderful human family.

Some of us in this congregation have been in prisons, as visitors or as guests of Her Majesty or perhaps as both. You know the first thing that hits you in jail? It's that those behind bars are just like those of us outside. The only difference is that they've been caught and the rest of us have not – yet!

God's love does not see people's differences, the labels we lose so much sleep about. It just sees people, a whole world of people. And it invites us to see the same.

... that he gave his son ...

Today we watch that man riding the donkey into Jerusalem. It's not just a brave individual refusing to be deterred by the odds stacked against him. What we see is the love of God, in action. A love that will culminate in the events of these days, a love to be symbolized for all time by a couple of wooden planks, some nails and a crown of thorns. We try to take it in, thunderstruck, baffled.

He gave his son. Our understanding fails.

Near the end of Graham Greene's novel *Brighton Rock*, an old priest is speaking with a deeply troubled girl as she tries to make sense of her chaotic life. At one point he says "You can't conceive, my child, nor can I or anyone, the ... appalling ... strangeness of the mercy of God".

That mercy will be at its deepest, its strangest, its most appalling, when the cross is raised on Calvary.

... that everyone who believes may have life ...

This is where, for many of us, things become personally difficult. Yes, believing is important. But belief is, at best, a struggle. There are so many questions, so many uncertainties, so many ifs, buts and maybes. You and I may hold to the Christian faith, but in our more honest moments we know we're hanging on by our fingernails. If everything depends on the strength of our believing, we're in big trouble.

But it's not our believing that everything depends upon. It's something far stronger, far more enduring.

A few years ago the World Council of Churches published a book entitled *A Procession of Prayers*. It was a collection of prayers and meditations by Christians around the world, following the life of Christ and relating it to the needs of people. There was one prayer in particular that grabbed my attention. It was from a person suffering from Alzheimer's disease. And it was very simple:

Dear Lord Jesus, I don't know who I am, I don't know where I am, and I don't know what I am. But please love me.

The message of these days is: he does.

With our own eyes we see it. Love that is real, unconditional, all embracing. Love that meets us in our moments of strength, that holds us even more surely in our hours of weakness. Love going on, unstoppable, unconquerable. To Jerusalem. To the end.

And beyond.

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