Good Friday St Margarets Eltham 2022

Each Holy Week I find myself facing significant questions. The first one is why did Jesus have to die? I want to do the child-like thing and ask; but why was that necessary? I was once told by a Year 2 child who attended church with her grandma told me that Jesus died to take away the sin of the world. I find that theory of substitutionary antonement completely dissatisfying! It suggests God is a vengeful banker. A price had to be paid for sin! So where do we go with our questions about the crucifixion?

This is what Sam Wells has to say: “We’re not sure what the cross means but we’re pretty sure it doesn’t mean what a lot of people say it means”.[[1]](#footnote-1) Then he adds the cross is the heart of the Christian faith.

In this interesting book called *A Cross In The Heart Of God*, Wells takes a tour through the Old Testament to point out all the places that God said he would **be with his people.** He says his aim is not to exegete the text to give its meaning. Rather, he examines **the symbols surrounding the crucifixion to sense the power of these images today.** The book becomes a study in God’s desire to be with us and how ultimately the desire to be with was the force that drove the crucifixion. He doesn’t believe the crucifixion was pre-ordained and he believes Jesus could have taken the off ramp at any point. He then begins a diagnosis of this proposition. These are the steps in the argument.

At Christmas we learn the word Emanuel means God with us. He then focuses on the Trinity as the perfect equilibrium of three persons that are in each other but in such a way that they are still with each other. He explains that **With** is the crucial word in the gospel.

This **being with** is astonishing mystery that the Trinity’s life is not simply self-contained but becomes open to creation to all fragile existence to life, to human beings. This mutual in-dwelling love could ultimately transform our human frailty and perversity. **This is the dynamic behind the bible the whole of history, the whole gospel. He poses two important questions. If God’s life opens up to us, will it destroy God - or will it transform us? And if it ultimately transforms us, how much will it cost God?**

Review Jesus’ ministry every story you have ever heard about it you could wrap it up in the statement; God is the God of love and compassion and healing; the life-giver. Keep that in mind then move to idea of the one who told us God is with us and think of all of the betrayal that Jesus faced. Wells begins word play on the word **with**, saying Jesus was left **without,** by all he worked so hard to be with. **Wells calls this a wholesale heartless dismantling of with!**

There was Judas, the disciples who couldn’t stay awake, and Peter. He says the cross is the generic human experience of being alone.

**T**he very essence of God is **being with the life of the Trinity**. At the crucifixion the perfect relationship of God’s being towards **us in Christ is lost. The two things we think we know for certain- that God is a Trinity of persons in perfect and eternal relationship, and that God is always present with us in Christ through the Spirit are experiences taken away for a moment.** Wells calls this the most poignant and terrifying moment in all history. The universe’s deepest realities become unhinged.

Wells claims this is the most vivid picture of hell we could imagine; not just our being separated from God’ but God being separated from God, God being out of God’s own reach.

Jesus experiences the reality of human sin because sin is fundamentally living without God. I do have some difficulty with this theology. It stands in opposition to what biblical scholars such as Dorothy Lee say about the indivisibility of the Trinity. However, when I recall that Wells says at the outset of his book that he is exploring the impact of image. Then I can accept what he says.

He says the cry of abandonment is just that. “Don’t shield yourself by the idea that this was God’s plan. For this moment Jesus was without the Father so he was not-God because he was without the essence of God which **is with**”.

Jesus gives everything in the cause of being with us. He gives beyond imagination. Lost his own being with the Father, the Father lost **for a moment** his being with the Son, the essence of his being. This loss is incurred because Jesus kept up his message of love.

Our alienation from God is so profound that it pushes God to this length to reveal and heal it.

Wells states this is what the cross is - our cowardice and cruelty confronted by God’s wonderous love. Is God’s desire to be with us forever, really worth God going to such lengths to secure?

Wells calls this the central moment in history. When Jesus has the choice of being with the Father or being with us and he chooses us. This is the choice on which our eternal destiny depends and it is the very definition of love.

Wells concludes that there was a public and a private aspect to the loss of with. The crowd represents the public aspect of the passion. Jesus died for group of people who misunderstand him as well as some who love him. He died for the whole world. The whole world didn’t put him to death but the crowd represents the cynicism, the fear, the jealousy and mob spirit, and sheer perversity that did put him to death. The disciples represent the personal aspect of passion. His close friends ran away.

Passiontide is not so much about conventional notions of power such as military dictatorship and religious authority, but it is about a power that is at the same time **far greater and more intimate than any of them** – God’s enduring love for the whole world and God’s love for us, Christ’s intimate friends.

As we begin to look at the Cross we begin to make the transition from the politics of betrayal and terror of the characters around Jesus to the very pressing sometimes similar attitudes in our own lives. The cross raises important questions for us. What does it mean to be a disciple; a follower? Do I realise these days have transformed the destiny of the whole world? Do I realise that Jesus’ passion is also about me?

**The true power in the universe is made present in the fragile form of Jesus.**

What does the crucifixion mean for us today as we look at the horrors in our world? We see the sin of humankind in the separation from God; everywhere. There is only one message that comes from the crucifixion. Not words spoken by Jesus but revealed by his actions. I am ***with***you. Jesus’ mantra is; **I love you, I love you, I love you….**

Reference

Wells, S. *A Cross In The Heart Of God* Canterbury Press Norwich London 2020

1. Wells, S. Passim Introduction and Chapter 1 *A Cross In The Heart Of God* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)