

Good Friday 2023

I don't know about you but I am something of a people watcher. I think People are endlessly fascinating. One of the places that is good for people-watching is in the shopping mall. Perhaps when I have time to waste while somebody else is shopping. The unceasing procession of humanity goes by.

They are all there. Look at their faces and the way they move. All shapes and all sizes.

The little people all wide-eyed and expectant, or perhaps crying to go home, or demanding whatever bright shiny thing catches their eye. And the tough young guys and girls roaming in packs, pretending to be totally cool. Young lovers completely entranced with each other.

The suited young people pursuing their important business.

The mums and dads and kids shopping til they drop.

The older folk carefully negotiating their way through the crowds and up and down the escalators.

Look at their faces- there are the anxious, the excited, the bored, the exhausted, the determined, the hopeful, the impatient. Those who are wanting to get out of there as soon as they can, and those who are enjoying a day out.

You see those who make a great effort to look their best, those who go to great length to stand out, and those who have given up the effort, and the frankly odd.

The beautiful people and those who have been battered and bruised by life.

I have to say that in times gone by, and I confess sometimes even now, I carry on an inner commentary which might go something like- Oh my goodness would you look at that- what were they thinking of- that is so ridiculous.

But If you look carefully you will see not only people trying too hard, or relating to others with impatience and

annoyance- -you will see courage, you will see tender expressions of care and gratitude , you will see love. If you take the time you might be touched by some of what you see- if you look not from a place of judgement but from a place of being alongside, as one with those you see.

For these are the ones for whom Jesus died on this Good Friday. This is the world that God so loved. It was a crowd like this who gathered to watch – some excited by the spectacle, some appalled by the cruelty, some who believed this was what Jesus had coming to him, and some who realized the terrible injustice of it. Though none it seems – not even his friends -finding the courage to voice their opposition – no doubt because they feared swift retribution if they did.

And we are there in that crowd- were you there when they crucified my Lord- yes I was – and it **should** make me tremble tremble tremble. We are part of that motley crowd of humanity- and at times we either shout for Jesus to be crucified or we remain silent.

Why did Jesus die? Jesus died because of his unwavering, unflinching love. Love is such a debased word for us- it comes with warm and fuzzy feelings, it is about romance ,it is sentimental and unreal. Good Friday is not warm and fuzzy. The love of Jesus love was unflinching - a love which he continued to express _ to live - even when it was obvious to anybody with eyes to see that there were many in powerful places who were deeply threatened by this love. Jesus way of love undermined their power, Jesus' love if it were to be accepted would be the end of their privileged positions. And faced with that sort of threat they, like people in positions of entrenched power ever since, would do their utmost to fight tooth and nail to protect their privilege. And in case we too easily think this is just about the great ones of this world, think how people fight to keep thing as they are in families,

3in community groups , in workplaces, in churches- how people cling to any little bit of power and influence.

This might well be about us and our fear of losing our precious place in the scheme of things. We are all part of the crowd- we share the fears and insecurities that give rise to divisive and sometimes abusive behavior towards others.

The Gospels are not about one event, at a particular time and concerning a particular people. They are about us. We are there in the pages of the Gospel in all the encounters with Jesus and we are there at the foot of the cross.

But then the next question is what does Jesus death mean? What does it mean for us. What makes it more than just another example of the countless examples of violent, tragic abuses of power, of injustice that occur every day.

Why is this this death amongst all the others remembered ? why do we come and venerate the cross and the one who died on it, why do we call this Friday Good?

There are many answers to that question. Some of the older language about atonement and sacrifice have become difficult for many of us.

For me to use again that overused word it is about love. The cross reveals to us the love at the heart of creation – the love that brought the universe into being and continues to sustain it.

I have already said that Jesus died because he never ceased to love. During Johns record of Jesus final teaching to his disciples , the final discourses Jesus uses the word love over thirty times.

And When he hung on the cross – when he looked down upon the faces in the crowd- he saw them not as a faceless crowd- he saw them as individuals. He had called himself the

Good Shepherd. The Good shepherd knows and loves each of the sheep of his flock. The Good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. The Good Shepherd goes to any length to rescue the last sheep that goes astray.

Jesus death on the cross demonstrates clearly the lengths to which his love was prepared to go.

We say of Jesus that he was fully human and fully divine or fully God.

We , all of us, are human and divine. We are created and sustained by the Spirit, we are made in Gods image.

But in us, the humanity and the divinity have been ruptured- we look inside ourselves and find that we are often at war with ourselves – the humanity and the divinity at odds. The unity for which we were created has been shattered.

In Jesus we see one in whom that unity is complete – there is no division in his nature – the divine and the human are completely at one. God is love and that love is fully expressed in Jesus.

In Jesus the creative word of God , the Word that speaks the universe in to being in the first chapters of Genesis – that word has become flesh.

Jesus life is a human life as it was created to be , which we were created to be. Jesus is truly human.

That fully human life – abundant life as he calls us is what he came to bring to us. His gift is joy – I have spoken these things that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

Jesus comes to mend the brokenness that runs through us all. He comes to mend the brokenness that shatters the human community.

To do that- , to heal us from our brokenness-to bring us this new life – Jesus himself had to be broken, in order that we

might live -he had to die. Out of love He poured himself out for us, he emptied himself that we might be filled. And in this he expresses the love of God for us in its fullest .

In the Gospels portrayal of the crucifixion Jesus speaks – the seven last words of Jesus.

Incredibly Jesus in the midst of his agony reached out to others. For us severe pain , both physical and emotional blots out any possibility of concern for others- all our energy goes into dealing with our own desperate situation.

But in Jesus the love of God does not destroy relationships, doesn't sunder community. And so in John's account Jesus speaks to his mother and to the disciple he loved. It is hard to overestimate the grief that Mary was suffering-- if for a moment we try and put ourselves in her place we will shudder . We will be chilled to the bone.– Jesus commits Mary to John to one another that they will be as mother and son -John from that moment takes Mary into her home .The suffering love of Jesus creates new and deeper relationships within the family of his followers . We are all called to care for one another out of the bonds of love that Jesus creates.

In Lukes Gospel Jesus again reaches out from the depths. He reaches out to his fellow sufferer beside him. This criminal, this violent robber, has his eyes opened and recognizes the presence of God in this innocent sufferer. Remember me, remember be when you come in your kingdom.

This day, this day you will be with me-this day you will be with me in paradise. However we might understand exactly what this entailed – what is abundantly clear is that Jesus welcomed this man, in his dying moments , after a life of crime – Jesus welcomed him to be with him- in the fullness of the life of paradise.

And not only was this thief forgiven-.so were all those who caused his pain. Luke again : jFather Forgive them for they do not know what they are doing- . This covers the whole crowd present there – the excutioners, the guards , but also the chief priests, the rulers, Pilate, the crowd who brayed for his blood Judas the betrayer, the disciples who denied him and fled. The whole mixed bag of those present. And the whole mixed bag of human beings ever since and even prior in time.

Even this mixed bag of human beings here in church today.

What happened on the cross was not just a moment in time , but reveals the suffering in the heart of God, and the love and forgiveness in the heart of God from eternity to eternity. Forgiveness for the loveable and the unloveable, the fearful and cowardly, the proud and self-satisfied, the faltering, stumbling, trying to do our best, but often getting it very wrong.

So when I'm at the shopping mall and do a spot of people watching- I try to catch myself when I set my self apart from them, when I make judgements of them. I am trying to remember that each one of them is created in Gods image, each one of them is loved , each one of them needs and receives the abundant kindness and mercy of God.

And I am one of them – I am one of them- just as needy and just as loved. God does not separate Godself from us. God is at work to restore us to that unity of humanity and divinity which was seen in Jesus the Christ.

This cross is the place where our humanity is laid bare, it is the place where our Godlikeness is made possible once more.

Where we learn to let go, to die, to all that divides us from our truest selves.- allowing ourselves to be loved and forgiven, allowing ourselves to love and forgive others.