

The crucifixion reveals our own violence

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Palm Sunday C, 28 March 2010

Isaiah 50:4 – 9a, Psalm 31:9-18, Phil 2:5-11, Luke 22:14-23.56 or Luke 23:1-49

The story of the entry into Jerusalem and the following crucifixion of Jesus really stands by itself. Any words I could add would be superfluous. The story itself does all the work of proclamation and teaching. For the elements in the story – the hope and affirmation of the crowd, the last meal with friends, the betrayal, the unjust condemnation, the torture and the horrific execution – are like arrows that go straight into our hearts.

Why is this so I wondered? I guess most stories of torture and murder effect us deeply. We cringe and feel distressed when we hear of political prisoners abused and tortured. We are deeply saddened and feel angry and helpless when we hear about atrocities committed against minorities in other lands and places. But there is something else about the story of Jesus, something in it that stands over and against us. Something in it that pulls us up short and reduces us to silence. For each of us I would imagine it is something very personal but I also suspect it is something tragically common to us all.

The torture and crucifixion of Jesus is a revelation of the most profound type. It obviously reveals something about God and his Son – that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, in fact God's own self, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life as John 3:16 says, and that the Son humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross as Philippians 2:8 says. But the story also reveals to us something about ourselves. What it reveals is what we as humanity as a whole must be saved from.

It reveals that at we are the mob. We are the fickle, violent, dishonest men and women who for our own ends, wants and needs will turn on another human being, an innocent human being, and orchestrate their torture and death. We make scapegoats out of others. We blame others. We misdirect our negative energies and emotions and crucify the other.

There are many reasons that we go down this road but there is one verse in Luke's story of the crucifixion that gives us a clue to a common theme in all instances of community violence. It is verse 23:12, "*that same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies*".

It is the turning on Jesus, the directed violence against the other that takes away the antagonism they have for one another. The rough waters of their own relationship is smoothed over by the projection of that conflict onto an innocent victim. They became friends. This is a fundamental aspect of all scapegoat stories. The violence directed against a supposed outsider brings a type of peace and unity to a society that is at heart fractured and wounded.

The story of Jesus and his betrayal and cruel death is the archetypal scapegoat story. It is the story of the Holocaust, of the Rwandan massacres, the poisoning of aboriginal men, women and children by white settlers, the torture of Islamic prisoners in Abu Grahb, the partitioning of the Palestinian lands, our own refugee compounds, the Cronulla riots and countless other times and places where the other has been defined less than human, less than one of us and suffered in the process. It is the story where a false peace has been bought by the blood of the innocent.

Now we can pretend like many do that we would never do what the mob did in Jerusalem that week. Perhaps we could say that the two crowds in the story are different groups of people and the ones that cheered and affirmed Jesus are safely tucked home in bed. But time and time again in world history we have seen what your average human being is capable of – not just some psychopathic Nazi death camp doctor or Khmer Rouge policeman – but your average suburban bloke or Sheila. And my friends this violence doesn't have to be restricted to some jaw dropping physical atrocity. Every time we create a category that re-enforces us and them, the in and the out, the saved and the damned, the evil empire and God's own country, we are setting up the moment when we will turn on the other.

And the death of Jesus, the way it was done, the betrayal and desertion by dear friends and followers, is like a blindfold being ripped from our eyes. The veil of the temple that is over our heart is torn apart and we see the horror of our fear, hatred and conflict at the centre of our culture and society. The sin that we need saving from is the sin at the heart of our way of life—it is the sin of Cain who murdered his brother Abel – it is the sin of that primal disconnection from our own flesh and blood, our fellow human beings and the source of our common life, the God of all.

There is a moment in the Eucharist when we enact this violence – we break the bread, we break it apart. The bread, the body of Christ, we break. It is a moment to remember that Jesus was broken, hurt and died to reveal to us our darkest sins and it is one of the most powerful moments of the thanksgiving prayer.

This all helps explain the despair and grief of the disciples who hid themselves away after the crucifixion. If they, and we, were only left with this revelation of our own violence it would be the end of the world, or at least the world, as they had ever known it. They would be left with their grief and deep pain and hopelessness without relief. But it is of course what happens on Easter Sunday and beyond that changes everything. The crucifixion of Jesus needs always to be understood against the resurrection. During this Holy Week we need to reserve a place in our memory of that blessed Easter day to come but for now we sit with the stark reality of Jesus painful and shameful death. We sit with the violence and cruelty. We sit with our own fears and confusion and we wait. We wait and sit with who we are.

May God's Spirit wait with us. Amen