

Good Friday 2018 - Reflections

Sermon part 1

The twelfth century philosopher and theologian Peter Abelard was among first Christian scholars and writers to reflect on the cross as a revelation of the love of God. In a story about Abelard he and one of his former students are living together in a little hermitage. One day they discover a rabbit caught in trap and Peter is overwhelmed by the pain and suffering of the animal and reflects on the suffering of the world and his own life. His companion speaks 'I think God is *in it* too' Abelard responds '*In it*? 'Do you mean that it makes God suffer the way it does us?' His companion nods. 'Then why doesn't he stop it.' His companion points to a large tree. 'The rings in that tree go up and down the whole length of the trunk. But you can only see them where it is cut across. That is what Christ's life was like, it is the bit of God that we saw.' 'The cross is the moment *we see* God and suffering brought together: but in fact it runs all the way through.'

The cross is ever present in the scriptures and in today's reflections we can see the cross in the life of Mary, Jesus' mother who endured it throughout her life. A reminder to us of the reality of the cross in the life of the world.

Reflection 1. 'And a sword will pierce your own soul too.' (Luke 2:35)

These are words spoken to Mary, the mother of Jesus, by the old Priest Simeon when Jesus was presented in the Temple in accordance with the law. We can but wonder what Mary must have made of these words. In John's gospel we are told that Jesus was pierced by a lance to ensure he was indeed dead. Mary would have seen this and understood those words all those years before. This year the Annunciation, March 25th the feast day commemorating the visit of the Angel to Mary fell on Palm Sunday, and so it passed us by. In this centenary of the ending of the Great War I thought we should hear from WWI Military Chaplain Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy better known to the troops as 'Woodbine Willie.' He wrote this poem called 'Good Friday falls on Lady Day.'

AND has our Lady lost Her place?
Does Her white Star burn dim?
Nay, She has lowly veiled Her face
Because of Him.

Men give to Her the jewelled crown,
And robe with brodered rim,
But fain is She to cast them down
Because of Him.

She claims no crown from Christ apart,
Who gave God life and limb,
She only claims a broken heart
Because of Him.

Yes we can carry our own crosses, burdens, disappointments, difficulties, and broken hearts. We can, because of him.

Reflection 2. 'Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt.' (Matthew 2:14)

In our day we see the unprecedented movements of people throughout the world. Perhaps as many as 65 million people seeking safety, fleeing oppression, discrimination, war, hunger and poverty. It is easy to forget that the Holy Family sought asylum in Egypt. Coming as it does so soon after Christmas we are prone to forget the story of the infanticide ordered by Herod after the flight by Mary and Joseph with the Christ child. So the Holy Family are refugees, exiles, returnees and eventually settlers in Nazareth, not their original home. Perhaps in our day it is, more than anything, the plight of children that most moves us. Many of us can barely begin to imagine the situation that parents find themselves in as they try to protect their children, the powerlessness they must feel.

A refugee for life is he
that is not shattered
or intimidated by caricatures
that mob and mock
one`s own face and position-

A refugee for life is he
that brings us to the innermost beauty
which lies in the human heart and mind -
of love and acceptance, forgiveness
and freedom and not hate, revenge and war.

Yes, Jesus is a living refugee in our midst.

The man on the cross is a refugee and his parents are powerless.

Reflection 3. 'Child, why have you treated us like this?' (Luke 2:48)

His father`s house he enters in,
Where rabbi`s teach the cure for sin,
While in his heart he hears the call
Which through his cross won life for all. (GB Timms)

This is another story that is often missed in the period after Christmas. The family of Jesus travel to Jerusalem as is their custom to celebrate a festival. Jesus is now twelve which means he is an adult in the eyes of the law and must take on his responsibilities as an adult Jewish man. The family begin their return to Nazareth and soon realise that Jesus is not travelling in the party with them. They return to Jerusalem and after a three day search find him interacting with the teachers in the temple. Mary's complaint to him: 'your Father and I have been searching for you with great anxiety' is met with a comment that expresses the gulf that is opening between them. The 'your Father' on Mary's lips, meaning Joseph, is met with the 'my Father' on Jesus'. For a second time in the gospel we are told Mary kept all these things in her heart. Those who have parented, mentored or nurtured can glimpse something of both the exquisite joy and pain that Mary and Joseph must have felt at the maturing of their child. They are surrendering their child to his divine mission, it is a surrendering that finds its conclusion on the cross.

I taught him
the true trade: to go
with the grain.

He left me
for a new master
who put him to the fashioning
of a cross for himself. (RS Thomas)

Reflection 4. 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' (Mark 3:33)

What of Jesus' relationship with his Mother? Early in Mark's gospel Jesus returns to his hometown. We can perhaps imagine that he has not been in contact with his family since leaving to join with the group gathered at the Jordan around John the Baptizer. He now has a group of his own around him, a ragtag bunch of fisherman, activists, and outsiders. Jesus' family hear second hand that he is in Nazareth, the gossip is that is out of his mind. Today we would be concerned for his 'mental health.' Mary goes in search of Jesus with his brothers, they are worried. His teaching and the company he keeps is coming to the attention of the authorities, scribes from Jerusalem have been despatched to find out who is causing this disturbance. And when his family find him, and those gathered around Jesus tell him that they are outside, he asks 'Who are my mother and my brothers?'

In the fourth gospel Jesus' first sign occurs at the wedding feast at Cana. Mary brings it to Jesus' attention that the wine has failed to which he responds 'Woman, what concern is that to you and me? And he goes on 'My hour has not yet come.' Neither of these accounts suggest any warmth.

The synoptic gospel accounts are all about Jesus' seeming failure. He begins so promisingly, crowds gathered around him, the marginalised in society particularly are entranced by his healing miracles and the other signs that he performed. He could do these because he was the Son of God. But salvation is not won by healing and miracles – those who gathered because of them will eventually be howling for his crucifixion and his intimate friends will betray and abandon him. Signs and miracles had nothing to do with his humanity, and therefore nothing to do with his Mother.

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Our salvation was won because it was Jesus' mission to be fully human, the most completely human person ever, to be loving, to be vulnerable, to suffer and to die. This is possible not because Jesus is the Son of God - he set his divinity aside for our salvation as Paul tells us, but because he was the son of a woman he had taken his *humanity* from Mary. This seemingly harsh statement 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' is Jesus way of saying I am here to build a community beyond my family, to create a new family. But at the end that family gathered in those early, heady days were gone.

For John the crucifixion however was Jesus' 'hour,' as he neared his death it was when he was most completely human and when he could say 'Woman here is your Son' and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' In doing this a new family was formed, created not on signs and wonders, but on love. (Herbert McCabe)

Reflection 5. 'Woman, here is your son.' (John 19:26)

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' ²⁷Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

Who is this beloved disciple, is a question that has been asked throughout Christian history and yet was answered by among the earliest of theologians, Origen the father

of Eastern theology. He wrote: *Jesus said to his mother 'behold your son' and not behold his man is also your son.* ' In other words, he said to her 'This man is Jesus whom you bore.' *Indeed when someone is perfect, it is no longer they that live, but Christ lives in them.* The beloved disciple then are all those who follow Christ, all those who claim his name, believe themselves to be children of God and therefore look to Mary as mother, the one whose yes to God enabled the bringing forth of love into the world.

That bringing forth of love met with opposition then as it does today; it would bring Jesus to the cross, but he bequeathed that love to us, the beloved disciples we who stand at the foot of the cross today.

Sermon part 2

The Stabat Mater was a 13th Century Franciscan hymn. Some of its words and the sentiment of the hymn seem strange to us today particularly we who stand this side of the reformation, historically and theologically. Those who were writing the poetry and hymnody at the time of the writing of the Stabat Mater saw Mary and the Church as one. We are the Body of Christ we say at every Eucharist. The Church the body of Christ with Mary as Mother. This is the spirituality of the Stabat Mater.

For us today perhaps we need to rest in the idea that a new family was born at the foot of the cross, this new family is one from whom no one can be excluded, because we share the same blood, the blood of the cross. Before he went to the cross Jesus prayed that this family might be one, 'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.' This remains the challenge of our faith, it is why the cross remains an enduring and crucial symbol because at its feet we are one. It remains the challenge of world to live out a spirituality of the cross to which all people will be drawn. A world in which there are no distinctions of colour, race, or creed.

The cross then stands before us then as the symbol par excellence of unity and of love. Peter Abelard made this understanding of the cross part of his life's work. A challenge to the understanding in his day of the cross as the means of placating an angry God. The Stabat Mater hymn in its day endeavoured to engage with the grief of the cross a grief that is revealed by the love of Christ for humanity represented by his mother and friend at the foot of the cross and their love for him. A love that transcends even those times that fill us with the most profound grief.

As always it is the poets and hymnodists that seem to tell it best. This is the middle verse of the hymn 'God is love,' by Timothy Rees in which he picks up the theme of Abelard of the ongoing pain felt by God, that we see in the cross.

God is love: and he enfoldeth
 All the world in one embrace;
With unfailing grasp he holdeth
 Every child of every race.
And when human hearts are breaking
 Under sorrows iron rod,
Then they find the self-same aching
 Deep within the heart of God.

Let us then come to the foot of the cross. Amen.