

St Philip's Anglican Church O'Connor

Maundy Thursday, 14 April 2022

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On Palm Sunday I spoke about the conflict in Ukraine and quoted the theologian Stanley Hauerwas: The Church is God's alternative to war. What might this mean?

We know that sacrifice lay at the very heart of many ancient faiths. Clearly human sacrifice was used in ages past to placate angry, capricious gods. And in our first reading it seems as if an angry un-placated god has brought a series of plagues on the people of Egypt, culminating in the death of the first born - both human beings and animals, to convince Pharaoh to release the Hebrew people from slavery. This event is remembered by Jewish folk to this very day as Passover.

How might we understand this event today? We would, quite rightly, shy away from any sense that our God might reach into our world to wreak vengeance, given what we believe of the God revealed in Christ. So has God changed? No, I don't think so. But we do have to wonder what God's role was in such a pivotal event as the Passover?

Perhaps if we look at the events that brought the Hebrew people to Egypt in the first place we might understand. We will recall Joseph's brothers allow him to be taken into slavery in Egypt; but he ends up not as a slave but as Pharaoh's right-hand man, saving the Egyptians from a deadly drought. The last scene in Genesis is of Joseph's brothers traveling to Egypt in order that they, too, might be saved from the drought - only to find their long, lost brother in charge. They rightly fear Joseph's revenge. Instead, however, here's what we read:

But Joseph said to them: *Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones. In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.* Even though Joseph's brothers intended harm, God intended it for good.

Can we find something like this occurring in the cross of Christ? God intended the cross for our salvation. Is this how we might understand God's role in the Passover, reading this event in the light of Christ. God took the occasion of God's people in slavery in Egypt and, combined with a series of disasters, made from it an act salvation, the liberation of God's people from slavery. The God revealed to us in Christ does not punish us, not to condemn, but to enter fully into the plagues and disasters, and make of them something new. God can even take sin and turn it into forgiveness and repentance; God can take even death and turn it into life.

Sacrifice remains at the heart of our faith but just as the Church is God's alternative to war, then the Church's alternative to sacrifice (writ large in war) is worship. We offer our sacrifice of praise, yes we lament, but our mourning is always turning to gladness, as we read in Isaiah: we are bestowed with a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

Tonight we celebrate the beginning of a new Passover, 'the Passover of gladness' as our hymn says. Our sacrifice is one of thanksgiving as we celebrate the Eucharist together. In one of our contemporary Eucharistic prayers we say: *On the night before he died, Jesus gathered with his friends to share a meal and wash their feet, teaching one more lesson of love.* Our sacrifice of thanksgiving spills out, our gratitude becomes the impetus for our mission in the world.

Tonight, this awful night, the night on which he was betrayed, becomes the means by which God reveals to us what sacrifice he requires of us: do this in remembrance of me. Not just a memory, but make my sacrifice a reality in your world. Wash one another's feet, offer your souls and bodies as we used to say in years past. It is all about worship, giving true worth to God and to one another because Christian sacrifice is an ethical idea, just as Christ is 'for us' we are 'for others,' a totally free and loving response to Christ's self-giving love. In God the act of betrayal is become the means by which we might we might know love. Amen.