

St Philip's Anglican Church O'Connor

**Good Friday, 15 Apr 2022**

Reverend Martin Johnson

The Russian Jewish poet Osip Mandelstam, who was arrested during Stalin's repression of the 1930s, and would eventually die in a Transit Camp near Vladivostok was, according to his wife, fearful of the Old Testament God. In her memoir 'Hope against hope,' she wrote 'he was fearful of this God's awesome totalitarian power. He used to say that with its doctrine of the Trinity, Christianity had overcome the undivided power of the Jewish God. Undivided power was for us, of course, something of which we were very afraid.'

On this Good Friday in 2022 we need no reminding of the undivided power which right now threatens the lives and livelihoods of so many. This attempt to somehow recreate a nation is at odds with the cross. A contemporary of Mandelstam the novelist Boris Pasternak of *Dr Zhivago* fame has a character in that novel say of this God coming to us: 'from now on the basis of life is no longer compulsion...the New Testament offers the unusual instead of the commonplace, inspiration instead of compulsion.' This character goes on 'Rome was at an end, the reign of numbers was at an end. The duty, imposed by armed force, to live unanimously as a people as a whole nation, was abolished. Leaders and nations belonged to the past. They were replaced by the doctrine of personality and freedom. The story of human life became the life story of God and filled the universe.'

In the cross we experience the Trinity, the very nature of our God is revealed, God is revealed as a broken tortured individual. No great leader of a nation, but the very epitome of every broken, tortured, raped and marginalised individual, every person who has suffered exclusion, isolation, prejudice and discrimination, for all time. When I am lifted up I will draw *all* people to myself, not by compulsion but by love, by inspiration.

This frightened the high priest Caiaphas, these marginalised folk, gathered around this wandering healer and preacher; his inspiration frightened him. 'What are we to do? Says the chief priests and the Pharisees. This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.' But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.' Never was a truer word spoken, never a more ironic one.

Because in Jesus' death a new nation emerges, a realm, but not like the ones that are fought over, there is no territory, language, or culture, not even a religion. As Pasternak wrote speaking of the Communism of his day: The duty, imposed by armed force, to live unanimously as a people as a whole nation, was abolished. It is the reign of God, with a broken, tortured, marginalised, isolated human being on the throne.

I hope that on this Good Friday we can be inspired by the cross and see on it the God who draws all people to himself, the Trinitarian God in whom there is no undivided power, but the power of love, which by its very nature is never imposed but is an inspiration for all. Let us pray that this love will in the words of Isaiah 'startle many nations;' yes, even our own. Amen