

Life-giving cross

Good Friday reflection 2008 - Gregor Henderson

John 19:17-30, 1 Peter 4:1-11

Friends, I want to suggest to you today that although the events of Good Friday are indeed about suffering and anguish and a horrible horrible death, in fact these events for us are life-giving, powerfully life-giving.

The gospel-writer John tells us he produced his book about Jesus "so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name". Life... it's in John's gospel that Jesus proclaims he is the way, the truth and the life; it's in John's gospel that Jesus proclaims he is the resurrection and the life; it's in John's gospel that Jesus says he came that people "may have life, and have it abundantly".

Here is the good news brought, taught and lived by Jesus - that God offers us life in Jesus, an abundant life on earth and an eternal life hereafter. This life is characterised by a close and living relationship with God, by prayerfulness, by forgiveness, by knowing God has granted you at least one special gift you're to use in service to others, by a strong sense of purpose, by willingness to give of yourself in worship and service, and by a deep joy, a sublime sense of peace, by knowing you are loved, forgiven, freed. This is what life is meant to be. It doesn't necessarily mean material abundance but it does mean spiritual abundance; it doesn't necessarily mean a life free from trouble and suffering, but it does mean the spiritual wherewithal to deal with trouble and suffering with patience, insight and courage.

How then does the crucifixion of Jesus offer us this sort of life? In four ways, I reckon.

First and foremost, the crucifixion shows us the depth of God's love. The very fact that Jesus accepts this undeserved and ghastly execution is an act of love. Jesus sees through the mission God has given him, a mission of teaching and embodying the love and forgiveness of God, to the very end. On the cross Jesus reaches out to his mother and commits her into a beloved disciple's care; he prays for God's forgiveness for those who've nailed him there; he promises salvation to the criminal who appeals to him; he refuses to lash out at those who mock him. All these are acts of love from the cross. There is nothing more life-giving than love, nothing. And love in the midst of death is powerful indeed. My wife's last words to me and our daughters last year, two hours before she died, to thank us for all we'd done for her and to say we are a wonderful bunch, were words of love that will feed my life always. In the crucifixion Jesus is offering us his self-giving love, life-giving love.

Second, the crucifixion exposes to us the reality of human sinfulness and evil. Jesus had done nothing to deserve this death. But religious and political authorities saw him as a threat to their authority - and he was, because pure goodness is always a threat to human power - so they decided to do away with him. The terrible truth is that if we were in their shoes, Jewish high priests or Pharisees, or Roman oppressors, we would have wanted him done away with too. Recognition of the reality of our capacity for wrongdoing and evil, recognition of sin, is life-giving, for it strips away our delusions, our pretences, shows us who we really are, and supplies us with humility. And then forgiveness, such as Jesus taught us in the Lord's prayer to seek and to give, and as he offered from the cross, always brings new life.

Third, the crucifixion calls us to be self-giving. Jesus' primary call to people was to "follow me". Throughout his ministry Jesus gave and gave of himself, even to acceptance of his death. One of the paradoxes of life is that the more we give of ourselves the more we are alive. Jesus taught "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who want to lose their life for my sake will save it". The conviction that life has a purpose of love for God and for others, and the faith and courage to follow that conviction, are life-giving.

And fourth, the crucifixion of course is not the end of the story. Jesus is not dead and gone, Jesus is risen and with us now. The crucifixion leads to the resurrection, and Easter Sunday brings enormous assurance and joy. Death is not the end of life, life goes beyond death into another realm, into eternity with God. Let me finish with a story of an old minister mate of mine, which I probably should keep until Easter Day. This minister, a bit of a larrikin mind you, once berated a Synod meeting in Victoria when people were in a self-deprecating mood, putting the church down, by rushing to the microphone and agitatedly calling out "What have we, the church, got to offer? Very little you say. Well, for starters, how about bloody eternal life!"

God's love gives life. Recognition of human reality and its accompanying humility gives life. Self-giving purpose gives life. Jesus' victory over death gives life. Today, rejoice and be glad, for the crucifixion of Jesus offers us life, abundant and eternal.

To the glory of God, Amen.