

Preaching Crucifixion

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Before I served in ministry in the United States, I'd never come across the service of *Tenebrae*. When I served at Duke University Chapel, I found it one of the most memorable worship services of the year. At around 7:30 p.m. on the evening of Good Friday there would be a single reading followed by a sermon; then, interspersed with *Passiontide* hymns, there would follow a series of readings, and after each one, one of seven huge candles placed on the altar would be snuffed out; finally the congregation of around 1,300 would listen, in darkness and silence, as the tower bell tolled 39 times. That silence was louder than any music or words.

The question that exercised the ministers and musicians of the Chapel in preparing for the service was what should happen after the great silence? The tradition I inherited was that a candle would be brought forward slowly from the back of the Chapel, more than 50 rows back, a journey taking a minute or so, and that the acolyte would light a candle that was placed to one side of the altar, at a lower level. It was a beautiful and compelling moment. The symbolism was unmistakable: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1.5). From this flame, the whole world would shine in glory. God's love had been snuffed out, but you can't snuff out the nature and destiny of all things. Humbly, quietly, but relentlessly, it would reassert itself.

The trouble was, it was an action befitting a Saturday night Easter Vigil rather than a Friday night *Tenebrae*. It seemed to me to represent a profound reluctance to stay with the unresolved, tragic, and terrifying experience of Good Friday evening. In subsequent years we tried various endings, but in the end we concluded that there could be no conclusion: the bell should toll, there should be silence; and, after a solemn interlude, there should be sufficient side-aisle lights lit to enable those who wished to do so to leave in safety.

This liturgical question goes right to the heart of the theology of Good Friday. Was the cross an agonising, horrifying, but ultimately successful and triumphant enterprise in which a limitlessly-loving and inexpressibly-gracious savior secured our eternal salvation by assuaging the rasping hunger of death and satisfying the just demands of recompense for sin? Or was it, rather, the tragic, cruel, and ugly epitome of the world's failure to embrace the utter goodness of God embodied in Christ, an ending so shameful, so isolated, so apparently final, that it exposes the church's deepest, yet invariably suppressed fears about the absence, defeat, or non-existence of God? If it was the former, the solemn entry of a candle is an appropriate and tender sign of completion, celebration, and first fruits of redemption. If it was the latter, the candle is a sign of our denial of the cost, risk, and full horror of the cross, a hasty and perhaps shallow attempt to turn tragedy into comedy, to resist pathos and rush to a happy ending.

If preaching crucifixion errs on one side or the other, it must surely be the latter. This is not the day to dodge the searing questions of suffering, doubt, and evil, in the assured confidence that it was "all part of the plan"; instead this is the day to go to the bottom of the slough of despond, knowing that the resurrection (though predicted)

would lose its power if anyone had seriously seen it coming. The seven last words from the cross are the utterances of an agonized and dying man; they lose their poignancy if they're simply transposed into a story where everything comes right in the end.

At the climax of the ghastliness of Golgotha, John's gospel tells us, Jesus says one single word. *Finished*. Finished. This is the word that seems to validate the upbeat version of Good Friday—the one that emphasizes the word *good*. Let's ponder for a moment the host of meanings of that word. Finished. The dissertation's finally edited and handed in. Finished. The marathon's run and I'm totally done in. Finished. The relationship's over, and she's told me she doesn't love me. Finished. The work of art is completed and ready for display. Finished. The counselling has run its course, and I can face the world without fear or bitterness or anger. Finished. I've served my sentence, and I can come out of prison. Finished. I've been told I've no longer got a job and needn't come back to work. Finished.

But it's dangerous to rush too quickly to calling Good Friday "Good." Surely Jesus' climactic words from the cross must be ironic. This isn't the way the story was supposed to end. Consider the heavenly host of angels in the skies above Bethlehem singing of peace on earth. Surely this wasn't the way they imagined it would all turn out. Recall the crowds on Palm Sunday waving branches and shouting Hosanna. Surely they weren't thinking of this apocalypse five days later. A lot of other words might capture it. Ruined, betrayed, wasted, lost, destroyed, devastated, ravaged, spoiled, wrecked... but not "finished." What might this word *finished* mean? Let's look a little closer. Let's see if we can discover what is finished by Friday afternoon. The cross polishes off not just a facile rendition of The Plan, but almost everything else that characterizes a too-easy codification of Christianity. Let's snuff out the seven candles on that altar of superficial tidiness one by one.

One thing that's finished is the blond Jesus with the constant smile, the loose-fitting toga, and the baby lamb constantly around his neck like a primal life-jacket. That would be the Jesus whose picture perched above my bed as a child. The one that loves the little children. There's nothing sentimental about the cross. There's no guitar-playing, commune-dwelling, tie-dying, knitted-yogurt-eating, country-road-singing, long-haired-lover-from-Liverpool, John-Denver-bespectacled Jesus in the face of Good Friday. Jesus is mutilated. He's taunted. He's asphyxiated. The Jesus of our projections, the kind friend, the handsome suitor, the Mr Fixit, the husky organic farmer, the country sage, the wandering minstrel—they all die at the foot of the cross. The rose-tinted Jesus of soft-focused promotional paraphernalia is gone. Finished.

Another thing that's finished is the conquering Jesus with the righteous fist, the Jesus whom the Crusader thought he was upholding as he smashed the head of the infidel, the Jesus whom the Inquisition thought it was promoting by torture and cruelty, the Jesus proclaimed by conquistadores with colonial mind-sets and rapacious ambitions, the Jesus that demands to seize control of the government, the Jesus that obliterates other religions from the face of the earth, the Jesus whose name is invoked to justify one race or people or gender giving themselves sanction to oppress and marginalize and laud it over others. On Good Friday Jesus doesn't conquer. He's humiliated. He's defeated. He's dragged through the streets like a slave or a dog. The Jesus that gives credibility to human power-grabs is gone. Finished.

And that's by no means all. The Jesus that makes for good citizenship and stable social relations is finished too. Jesus died a criminal's death. We can plead his in-

nocence as long as we like, but in the eyes of the Sanhedrin, he was acting as if he was the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who was bringing Israel's long exile to an end. And that meant he had to die. And in the eyes of the Romans, he was a rabble-rouser and a potential king, and that made him guilty of a capital crime. Jesus was a good citizen of the kingdom of heaven, but not a very reliable citizen of Rome. So the meek Jesus that believes in law and order, the mild Jesus that instructs children to be good and kind and to obey their parents, the Jesus that doesn't want to rock the political boat or disturb the neighbours – that Jesus dies in the face of the cross. That Jesus is finished.

And what about the Jesus of The Plan, the Jesus of the mathematical equation—the Jesus that says, “Take one drop of total human depravity, add one pinch of utter divine grace, mix with one broken law and blend in one innocent death, and then subtract one angry devil”? That Jesus, who seems subject to some extraneous logic invisible to the eyes of the disciples but obvious to the well-informed cosmic legal historian, that Jesus disintegrates in the face of the circumstantial detail of the cross. If Jesus were simply a component in a mathematical equation or legal formula that got us off the devil's hook, then why would the gospels tell us so much about the disciples who deserted him, the women who followed him, the mother who loved him, the sinners he forgave, the sick he healed, the poor he accompanied, the blind he led? By the time we get to the cross, the gospels have shown us enough about Jesus not just to show us how much he loves us but to make us love him. You don't love a formula or an equation. The cross shows us not forensic symmetry but wondrous love. The Jesus of the divine bargain is finished.

And then there's the Jesus that watches idly by while earthquakes destroy countries, while ISIS and Al-Qaeda plague a generation, while civil war becomes a way of life across the world, while loved ones develop cancer, while drought afflicts continents, while hurricanes and tsunamis wreck households and livelihoods and cities. Nero watched from afar and fiddled while Rome burned; but Jesus isn't looking idly through some heavenly telescope. Jesus is suffering an agony as bad as any known to human experience. Jesus isn't tucked up in the sky, peering down from a safe distance: he's in the middle of a human train crash, the glass and wheels and rails and twisted metal all contorting his body and piercing his soul. If you ever look up to the sky and shout “Oh God, why?” you're looking in the wrong place. You need to be looking into the face of the crucified Jesus. That distant remote-control God has got nothing to do with Christianity. In the face of Good Friday, that Jesus is finished.

And here's a painful one. The Jesus that belongs to the church, the Jesus that gives an affirming thumbs-up to everything Christians set out to do, the Jesus that makes a congregation a circle of holiness and a cradle of wholesomeness—that Jesus withers in the face of the cross. It's not clear when the church begins. Maybe when Jesus gives Peter the keys of the kingdom. Maybe when Jesus says to Peter, “Feed my Sheep.” Maybe when Jesus breathes on the disciples and says, “I send you.” Maybe when the Holy Spirit comes down at Pentecost. But a good candidate for the beginning of the church is right here at the cross, when Jesus hands his mother over to the care of the beloved disciple. You can see Mary representing Israel and the beloved disciple representing the church, and Jesus' instructions portraying the inextricable destiny of the two. Not a glamorous scene, is it? This is two fragile figures amid a vista of apocalyptic devastation. Not exactly a mega-church bent on growth. Lends a

whole new irony to Jesus' words, "Where two or three are gathered, I am with them," doesn't it? In the face of the cross, there's no place for the self-congratulatory church that's holier than God. There's only a place for church that looks like Jesus. Any other church is like any other Jesus. It's finished.

But here's the most important one of all. The cross confronts us with the fragility of Jesus. He's no superman who leaps down and says, "Only joking!" He suffers to the end. We wonder how this awful spectacle can possibly be necessary for our salvation. We're supposed to wonder that. We wonder whether this tiny, broken, wasted body can possibly be the body of God. We're supposed to wonder that. We wonder how any joy, any hope, any glory can possibly emerge from this hideous catastrophe. We're supposed to wonder that. We wonder why God doesn't utterly reject us after we've shown the very worst that we can do. We're supposed to wonder that. All of those wonderings should be part of our faith, our imagination, our daily prayer, and our compassionate hearts. But for all our wondering and pondering, one thing is utterly clear. When we see the pain, when we feel the grief, when we look upon the loneliness, when we touch the wounds, when we hear the cries, we know, we know that God will go to any lengths for us, God will never be separated from us, that loving us is written into God's DNA, that there's no part of God that has any desire to be except to be with us, that Jesus is the embodiment of the way God's destiny is wrapped up in us forever. Any other notion of God, any other speculation about God's wishes, any other idea about what lies at the heart of God is gone. Over. Dismissed. Finished.

Jesus' final word: "Finished." His life is finished. His ministry's finished. The scriptures are finished. The reconciliation of God and creation is finished. And a host of misconceptions are dispatched at the same time. Jesus isn't a cosy companion. He's not a triumphalist conqueror. He's not a law-abiding do-gooder. He's not legal formula. He's not a heartless onlooker. He's not a pretext for Christian self-satisfaction. All those idolatries are finished. They're snuffed out like a line of candles, one by one. Finished. Finished. Finished. Finished. Finished. Finished. Finished. Finished.

Everything's finished. Everything's desolate. Everything's laid waste. Everything's lost, except the heart of God laid bare. And if we're not seduced by a comforting saviour, if we're not mesmerised by a merciless hero, if we're not domesticated by a model citizen, if we're not obsessed by a mathematical equation, if we're not alienated by a distant deity, if we haven't fled from the cross like most of the church for most of its history, we might just get close enough to glimpse that sacred heart laid bare.

This is the context for preaching crucifixion. It's not about offering a form of salvation tidier and cleaner and more assured than Jesus. It doesn't have to be putting further doubts in the worshipers' minds than are already there. What it does have to do is to name and explore the vivid feelings of betrayal, despair, lostness, shame, fear, sorrow, and profound, perhaps total, abandonment that Christ experiences in his Passion, and at least hint at the ways these feelings are mirrored in the lives of the listeners. If people go to church on Good Friday and don't return on Easter Day, they can expect to find themselves in an unresolved state of turmoil, confusion, and dismay. If people appear at church on Easter Day without having been present on Good Friday, they can expect to sense they are in the midst of relief for which they knew not the preceding anxiety, joy for which they shared not the foregoing terror,

plenitude for which they perceived not the former scarcity. If the preacher on Good Friday has not done his or her job, the preacher on Easter Day will be deprived of the delight of proclaiming release from a prison that was never fully entered. If the Good Friday preacher goes ahead and resolves the unbearable tension of Christ's death (was it all in vain?), then the preacher on Easter Day has little left to say.

Many people at Duke Chapel grieved the loss of the poignant and exquisite candle at the conclusion of the Tenebrae service. But it was an important grief for all to share. That powerful silence that followed the extinguishing of the final candle was the most eschatological moment in our liturgical year. If 1,300 people could sit together and live with that unbearable tension, perhaps they were really being formed in soul and mind and character to encounter the worst that life can bring. And perhaps, like at no other time, they were coming face to face with God.