

Good Friday – 22 April 2011

Christ Church South Yarra

Studdert Kennedy, nicknamed “Woodbine Willie” was a Chaplain to the Forces in World War 1. His experience of the horrors of the trenches led him to see in the Cross, not the impassability or heartlessness of God, but Divine compassion. . . .
[Love’s Redeeming Work p.595]

The crucifixion of Jesus has a range of theological meanings, but none so profound as the Cross as a sign of God’s love for his creation. God so loved the world that he came into the world in the person of Jesus who lived our common life, who experienced our joys and sorrows, who suffered our pain, who knew our sense of spiritual loneliness and the experience of an agonising death. For our God to have identified with us in Jesus so completely speaks of a God who is not far off, remote and uncaring, but is close, intimate, and full of compassion. The Cross of Jesus shows God’s genuine compassion for all who suffer in this life.

Indeed the central fact of Christianity is that God is with us in all the trials and tribulations of life, in our disappointments, our failures, and our tragedies and with us too in our bewilderment when we too cry out “My God, why have you forsaken me?” God in Christ Jesus has personally entered the darkness of this world, plumbed the depths of darkness so that there is no human being who suffers with whom Christ does not identify; God is with all who suffer so that in the darkness of the world, and in our own dark times, yours and mine, we can find the presence of Jesus Christ.

And though God’s loving presence with us in the darkness does not eradicate the darkness, his loving presence can help to lighten it. In the Chapel at Cabrini there is a basket of little carved wooden crosses known as ‘holding crosses’ because they fit comfortably in the palm of the hand, a tangible sign of God’s presence in time of need. I’ve seen (as have most of us familiar with hospitals) these crosses worn around the neck, tucked into pyjama pockets, kept under the pillow, and clutched in the hand, even by day and night. The message of Calvary is that in our desolation can be found the comfort of God’s presence. To quote theologian Richard Baukham, “Bringing God’s love into our darkness, Jesus removes the lovelessness of our darkness.” or to put it the other way round, Jesus removes the lovelessness of our darkness by bringing God’s love into it.

Sometimes, of course, we find only darkness, feel only the absence of God, and find no hope or consolation. Baukham reflects on the experience of Mary Magdalene who stood by the cross with Jesus but with no sense of God’s presence, not knowing there was anything to wait for. Just waiting! But for Mary, as for us, God is there in the darkness - and as with the surprise of Mary who stood - still dismayed - at the empty tomb, we may come to hear, at first perhaps without recognition, the voice of the risen Christ calling us by name.

Just as there is no-one who suffers for whom Christ on Calvary does not show solidarity, there is no-one who cannot be brought to share with Christ in his resurrection. As Richard Baukham puts it, Christ “died the death of the most abandoned so that even the most abandoned might share in his resurrection.” Faith in Christ offers the hope of change and renewal to us all - to each of us in our particular kind of poverty and need. Christ died to show us God’s compassionate love for the world joining us in our suffering and, to an extent, liberating us from it.

But he died also that we might be drawn to share his compassion, to feel as he does, to love as fully as he does. We are called as someone has said, to enter into the subjectivity of Christ, to look upon the world and all people with the eyes of Christ. And as Christ longed for the redemption of his creation, he wants us to show the same compassionate love as he did for our tortured, lost and bewildered world. The crucified Jesus shows how much God loves us and how much God in Christ wants us to *Love one another as God has loved us*, to be his healers of Creation.

We - who would have the mind of Christ and know of his compassionate love - are called to be his agents in the world. Whatever else it means, to say that we are ‘the body of Christ’ means we are all called in the words of Isaiah “to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for prisoners, to comfort all who mourn, to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of splendour for the heavy heart.” The Church seeks to bring about the reign of God, the healing of creation brought about by the transforming power of mercy and compassion. We carry on Christ’s mission to extend the Kingdom of justice, love and peace by being Christ’s heralds in the world - called, not to preach [though preaching has its place] but to **be** the good news.

And not on a global or any heroic scale (most of us are too puny for that) But with those around us, with whom we come in daily contact. As Pope Paul once reminded pilgrims, “You know, you may be the only gospel some people will ever read.”

On this Good Friday, as every day, the Cross of Jesus challenges us to become ever more Christ-like, to look with compassion on those who suffer the world over - those who are far off, yes, but to those who are near as well, those around us - and to commit ourselves as Christians to Love’s redeeming work.

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