

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

GOOD FRIDAY

FRIDAY 25 MARCH 2016

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John 18: 1-9; John 19: 1-5, 23-27, 28-30, 32-34; Psalm 42

INTRODUCTION

In the last couple of weeks during Lent, in the lead up to Easter, we have been exploring the stories the gospels tell us about the suffering and death of Jesus.

We looked at how Mark portrayed Jesus as the son of man, whose journey on the cross ends in a cry of deep despair, "God, my God, why have you forsaken me?".

We have seen how Matthew paints a very different picture and portrays Jesus as a Cosmic King to whose undeserved suffering and death the whole cosmos responds with apocalyptic force. The earth and the heavens, according to Matthew, shake with rage and indignation when Jesus is put to death.

Luke presents Jesus as one who draws people in and is building community until his last breath, with Jesus gently surrendering himself in faith as he "gives up the Spirit" and hands over to God.

Today we will look at the gospel of John and discover that here the same story is presented from a different angle again, painting a picture where Jesus' journey is placed within the context of the wider scriptures and connected backwards and forwards to the history and future of all creation.

John presents us with an intricate story, echoing with references and metaphor relating it back to the journey of God and people in every way imaginable.

READING: John 18: 1-9 The garden

REFLECTION

The garden. Through use of words and imagery, the writer of John connects us, here, where the suffering of Jesus begins in earnest, to the garden of Eden in Genesis.

To that place where humanity was first confronted with its limitations and fallibility. According to Jewish interpretation, the place where we, as human beings, first grow up. The place where we first discover imperfection, and pain, betrayal and abandonment.

And what happens here, in the Kidron valley, is a mirror image of what happened there, at the beginning of time, and has been happening ever since: The peace and the harmony of the garden shattered as a consequence of that imperfection.

It is in this garden that we hear Jesus, for the seventh time in the gospel, refer to himself as "I am", three times, indicating that the divine is present in what happens here. Or here, even more than anywhere else.

That the soldiers who have come to arrest him step back and fall to the ground an appropriate obeisance to the one in whom God's glory shines through, even in the midst of impending doom and darkness. "I am" is here, God is present, in Jesus, in this man who the authorities have come to arrest, who is betrayed by a friend and who is about to suffer deeply.

God is here. Present where pain and suffering are inflicted and experienced by his children. In Jesus.

READING: John 19: 1-5 Ecco Homo

REFLECTION

When Jesus is put before the crowd, dressed up and humiliated, beaten up and abused, diminished in every way possible, and Pilate utters the words “See the man”, the scene is loaded with theological meaning, with Christological implications and drenched in Johannine irony.

As Jesus’ antagonists dress him up like a king and address him like a king, they ironically recognise and pay homage to the truth about him. He is king, but not in the way they can see and validate.

Again, as Pilate puts him before the crowd, a royal figure emerges wearing the instruments of royal investiture. And as Pilate exclaims: “See the man” again, a deeper truth emerges about this man and his God, redefining both who and what Jesus, this man, really is.

The word used in the Greek for man is anthropos and would probably be translated more accurately with “see the human” if that didn’t sound so awkward in English. The word for “see” or “behold”, a technical term used for divine revelation.

Here, before the crowd, the true and profound nature of Jesus’ humanity before God becomes fully visible and unambiguously clear: Humiliated, beaten and abused, suffering deeply and unjustly, Jesus could never be more human than he is at that moment.

Here the foundation for the “fully human” of later creeds is decisively put in place, but, at the same time, the divine revealing himself more deeply and profoundly than ever before in that tortured, mocked and abused flesh. “The fully divine” and the “fully human” collapsing into each other in a confusing, paradoxical, unintelligible truth too deep for words.

In the gospel of John, Jesus is “I am”, is God’s self-communication to the world revealing what, in the end, is true, is light, is God’s way. And here, stripped bare, before the crowds, beaten up and abused, is where that reality takes shape as nowhere else in the gospels.

Here, where humanity is understood and defined at its deepest and most profound level as vulnerable and fragile, stripped to its absolute bare bones in this beaten up and humiliated figure, we at the same time are asked to see “I am”: God’s self-revealing communication in and through this man as he is here, suffering and diminished.

On the cross, the gospel of John tells us Jesus is “lifted up”, is lifted from the earth, from the mortal, human, earthly, created condition in its total dependence on God to become a sign of God’s presence in that earthly, mortal, human, created condition, his utter and total dependence in suffering fused with and absorbed by the presence of the divine in that same suffering.

In the gospel of John, suffering and revelation, the basest of human realities and the deepest presence of the divine collapse into one reality on the cross where Jesus is literally between heaven and earth, holding the two realities together in love, in truth, as light.

The suffering servant of the prophets becomes the human being par excellence where God himself is revealed to be present in this world.

READING: John 19: 23-27 The birth of the Church

REFLECTION

When Jesus is stripped of his clothes it is revealed that what he is wearing is a priestly garment. Dressed up like a king, presented to the crowd as the tragic human figure of the suffering servant from the prophets, here another layer of Jesus’ identity is laid bare.

Jesus as priest. As the one who is authorised, ordained if you will, to make the necessary sacrifices to reconcile humanity with God. That humanity that so deeply and decisively reveals itself in him, reconciling

it, that vulnerable, stripped down, fragile reality, in himself, with the revealing of God in him as love, as light, as way and as truth.

Meanwhile, standing near the cross, were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene and some of his disciples. And from the cross, as earthly and heavenly realities clash into each other, as divine suffering and human dignity struggle to exist in the same place, community is called in to being and the Church is born.

The Church is born. Where grief stricken, fearful, bereaved people hold on to each other while they watch the unspeakable truth of loss, pain and death take all their hope and future from them, is where Jesus' self gives them to each other and commissions them to become a home for one another. To be his body, for each other and for the world.

READING: John 19: 28-30 I am thirst

REFLECTION

And still it is not finished. One last thing must be acknowledged, one more thing fulfilled from scripture. "I am thirst" says Jesus.

Earlier in the gospel we have heard him say: I am the bread of life, I am the living water, I am the shepherd, the gate, the way, the truth, the light and the life. I am the vine and you are the branches. And in the garden: I am he. Adam. The man. The King, the servant, the priest.

Even that is stripped away at this last instance, before Jesus gives up the Spirit, and hands the very last bit of his essence over to God.

"I thirst"

There is nothing left but a deep thirst for wholeness, for healing, for justice. God and man come together in this moment of deepest despair and suffering where every vestige of hope and dignity has been stripped away, and they thirst together, united in this man, in whom God has become so gloriously and visibly present.

With the taste of sour wine in his mouth, the vine bows his head and descends, willingly and in utter surrender into nothingness. Into a place where even his Spirit has been given up.

And as he does, we hear echoes of the psalms, of the prophets, of other places in the scriptures that refer to that deep, heart breaking, soul wrenching thirst that we, as humans, suffer where people are made to lose their dignity, are stripped of their human essence, and suffer in unjustifiable, inexcusable ways....

READING: Psalm 42

READING: John 19: 32-34 Wounds as womb

REFLECTION

And this is where the story of Jesus' suffering concludes, with blood and water flowing from the cross, heralding the birth of a new creation, a different way of being. Water and blood, carriers of life, symbols of liberation and renewal, flow from the same place as where, at the beginning of time, God took a rib and created another. And Eve for Adam, a woman for man, relationship, community, another to love, care for and revere.

The wound becomes a womb.

In the middle of this death, the beginnings of a new world is coming to birth. The lamb is sacrificed, the Spirit released, the Christ is buried, like grain, to make room.

The grain that has died and will be buried, carries life in itself that will rise again to bear much fruit. The vine, although it may look dead in the depth of this winter, is already pumping nutrients to the branches. In death, in the vulnerability and despair of human suffering and death, God is at work and does not let go. The garden is waiting to receive the seed and flourish. The Spirit of God in Jesus is released into the world, taking shape in you, in me, in creation, to feed, to nurture, to care for, and to love the world into becoming a new creation.