

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
GOOD FRIDAY REFLECTION
FRIDAY 22 APRIL 2011
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“To Die and Rise with Christ”

When Bruce, our organist, and I were preparing this service two weeks ago, I was struck by some of the sentences in the hymn in the old methodist hymnbook that we will sing after this reflection. Although some of the content of the hymn grates with my twenty first century theology, there were other parts of it that really resonated with me.

“O Love divine, what hast thou done?”

Every day we see immeasurable suffering of innocents on television. Every day people die terrible deaths and leave the world to cope with hopelessness and despair at their departure. And most of them will have done nothing to deserve it.

Knowing of all this suffering affects us. Even the suffering of people we don't know personally, or even those we do not know at all. Fortunately only a fraction of all this suffering comes really close. Most of us and most of our loved ones are spared the ravages of natural disaster, war or devastating misfortune. But still.

To hear about the suffering or misfortunes of others affects us, even if they are people we don't know and aren't close to. We will, even if it is for a moment, find ourselves identifying with them, asking: “What if it had been me? Or one of my loved ones? What if it had happened here? And not far away? What if I'd be the one walking the valleys of death?” And of course, because we all know suffering at some time in our lives, we are all too able to identify with others and feel their pain.

It becomes even more difficult when suffering is deliberate or unjustly inflicted. Especially when we know, somewhere in our heart of hearts, that we are benefitting from it. Sweat shops, child labour, poverty, or the complex economic and social systems of a world where more people go hungry than have their fill to eat, each day.

O love divine, what hast thou done?

We talked in the past few weeks about every person being created in the image of God, every human being living on God's breath, each and everyone of us deeply and passionately loved by God and invited to love God back in equal measure. About the invitation to engage with God in a loving relationship that is passionate, profound and meaningful. To be brought to wholeness and healing. To become, as people, images of God's divine love as much as we can.

We also learned that when we betray or deny that divine call God suffers - longs, waits, wants - us to find our way back to God and to what we are: God's people who can only be whole when connected to the image of God in the other, both in lower case and in capital letters.

Jesus, when he came and walked among us, identified and travelled alongside those who suffered, alongside those who needed healing, who had been damaged, who were lost, in despair, cast out, living in the shadow. And showed them light, life, healing, and wholeness. Showed them how to

connect with the divine and find their way back to God and to that which is of God in themselves. Jesus healed, and challenged, and enticed, entreated those around him to find their way to unity with God and a life guided by the healing power of the divine.

He died. An undeserved and violent death of political expediency inflicted by powers that ruthlessly got rid of anything that might be threatening the fragile “peace” they managed to keep. What after all is the life of one, if it is given for the benefit of many?

He was a sacrifice that according to some, at the time, needed to be made.

Through that death this man, Jesus, who had come alongside so many, came even closer to those who suffered. Like so many others he became a victim of political violence: he suffered betrayal, bullying, he was abused, beaten up, put on a cross and made to die one of the most terrible deaths humanity has ever designed. He joined the innumerable who have found themselves in the valley of the shadows of death, suffered and died. He was spared nothing of the despair people can be put through when they find themselves trapped in the politics of injustice and wanton power.

And in him God died. As God dies in every human being when the breath of life is extinguished. With every human being that suffers, God suffers. Because we are, all, image bearers of God in whom his Spirit breathes.

As Christians we believe that in Jesus that was even more so than it has ever been with anybody else. That in him the divine lived and revealed itself in an exceptional way. His unity with the divine was so strong that it was hard to tell where one started and the other finished.

He was crucified, was killed for politics' sake, suffered and died and was buried. Leaving his disciples in disarray, hopeless frustration and despair. Haunted by his words of love, haunted also by the taunts of his enemies: “Now what will you do? Come off that cross if you can! See if you can save yourself now. You saved enough others!”

And they must have wondered: Is this where it finishes? Is this where a life lived in God’s image will take you? Is this what pure and selfless love will do for you?

And you can see them sit, the shadow of the cross looming over them. With the memory of the bullying and the beatings, the humiliation, the pain, the purple cloak, the crown of thorns, Jesus holding the reed in his hand, dripping with blood, fresh in their minds.

It will have affected them, deeply, to see him, whom they have been following, suffer so. And they will have felt that their journey with him had come to a dead end, somewhere in this valley of violence and death. Lost and without future, they had to let him go. And with him part of themselves died. Hope most probably, faith, trust that God would provide. They will have felt insecure about his way, the message he lived, the love he showed, his healing power, the peace he preached. What was left of that now?

And in that experience, with the cross looming over them, they died, at least partly, to who they thought they were and to what they expected their future to be. Their hands empty, their hearts broken, their lives turned upside down, they flee, they run away because they can’t bear it, aren’t able to deal with the harsh and unforgiving reality of it. The only thing left is their love for him that somehow will not die, somehow refuses to let go of them, even where they have given up on it. Love that sees them through to the other side where they will discover that the power of what happens after is much stronger, much more potent than what was there before.

The valley of death is not the last station for them or for this exceptional man in whom they have glimpsed God's presence, God's love, more than in anyone or in anything before. Love lives, and breathes, and keeps on living and healing and bringing peace. Even if the lord of Life and Healing himself is crucified. Even if life is crushed and hope has died. Amen.

HYMN

O Love divine, what hast thou done!
The immortal God hath died for me.
The Father's co-eternal Son
Bore all my sins upon the tree.
Th'immortal God for me hath died:
My Lord, my Love, is crucified!

Is crucified for me and you,
To bring us rebels back to God.
Believe, believe the record true,
Ye all are bought with Jesus' blood.
Pardon for all flows from His side:
My Lord, my Love, is crucified!

Then let us sit beneath His cross,
And gladly catch the healing stream:
All things for Him account but loss,
And give up all our hearts to Him:
Of nothing think or speak beside,
My Lord, my Love, is crucified!

Charles Wesley, Methodist hymnal