

Christ Church *Sermons*

Good Friday, March 21, 2008
The Reverend Nancy J. Allison

Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22: 1-11; Hebrews 10:16-25

“God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19). That is the conviction, not only of St. Paul who wrote these words for the little Christian community at Corinth only twenty-some years after the crucifixion, but it is also the sure and certain belief of the entire New Testament church. God was in Christ. Jesus, the crucified one, was not simply a good man, or an exceptional teacher, or even a prophet to rival Moses and Elijah. He was, and is, “God with us.” God acting on our behalf. God achieving what we could not achieve. God overcoming what we could never overcome. God reconciling what, from our side, remains hopelessly estranged. “God was in Christ,” says the church, bridging the gulf of alienation that exists between a lost humanity and the endless mercy of God.

On Good Friday, we struggle to express this conviction, knowing that we don’t really comprehend it, knowing that we have no words that even come close to expressing why this death is so important, or how God acts within it to reconcile the world to himself. Throughout history, the church has had all sorts of theories about how Jesus’ death atones for our sins and brings us peace with God. Most of them seem unconvincing to us, now, and have little authority with us today. We don’t understand why Jesus’ death could ransom us from the power of evil, or why God should need a sacrifice of blood to wash away our sins and offenses. Why should suffering and pain have anything to do with ultimate mercy and forgiveness? And, why should this terrifying and awful passage of death upon the cross be the narrow way that leads to eternal life?

I don’t pretend to understand. Four years of college, three years of seminary, almost forty years, now, in the service of the church – But, No, I don’t understand it. I only know that it means more to me every year. And, perhaps, that is because I have seen for myself just how deeply we all need redemption. How people like you and me – not really bad people – but self-protective people, somewhat fearful people, people who may have, often quietly and privately, lost faith, and hope, and purpose in life – how we go on, year after year, longing for redemption – deeply and fervently longing that the source of Absolute Love might reach down into the pain of our lives and heal us. What we want is not simply that God should be in Christ, but that God should be in us, reconciling our life and our world to Himself.

We may ignore this longing – and most of us do – as the layers of our own self-deception tighten around us, as we spin the cocoon of a false self that God cannot get through. But if, for even a moment, we let down our guard and become aware of our pain, and the pain of the world, if the slightest chink opens in our armor, then God’s Spirit blows in and begins to strip away our self-deception and we are forced to admit that there is something seriously wrong with who we are and how we live. If, in any way, this has been your experience, then, you have begun to understand the Passion of Jesus Christ according to John.

John is always the Gospel for Good Friday, and it’s a deliberate choice. Because John, more than any of the Gospel writers, understands that the cross is a stepping stone to Glory. Through the cross, God reaches into our dying world to open the way to True Life. Through the cross, a man of flesh and blood is lifted up to the throne of God. The other Gospels concentrate on the suffering of Jesus, and especially on his sense of abandonment – “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” The horror of that cry has got to true to the historic

circumstance of the crucifixion. John knows that history. He knows the agony in the Garden. He knows the fear of pain and death. He knows the betrayal, the mocking, the cowardice, and loss of every human support. But, what is important to John is that we see through these things, and beyond these things, to the central fact that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.”

For the cross is a battle field between the Light of Life and the powers of Darkness. It is the place of judgment where we are saved or we are condemned. It is the point where the world must choose – to be for God, or to be for itself. That’s always the choice we humans are asked to make, says John. Will we be born from above? Will we let God’s Spirit flow through us and bring to birth our true life, and joy, and love? Will we allow God’s wisdom, and will, and loving kindness to direct us, and change us and transform us, day by day, moment by moment? Will we receive our life from the life of God, or will we try to take it from our own darkness and mold a false reality from the world of the flesh?

The High Priest, Pilate the Governor, the soldiers who perform the actual execution, they are not particularly bad men. All of them believe they simply do their duty as the world defines it. They protect religion. They defend the laws of Rome. They follow the orders of their superiors. But, all of them take their power from the world in its darkness. They believe they act with legitimate authority, but, in fact, they are the pawns of destructive forces they do not understand. They do not receive their life from above. Their actions do not flow from the Spirit working within them, but rather from the dark, diminishing forces of hatred, malice, jealousy and fear. They are the representatives of the whole human race. They are us – people who prefer darkness rather than light, order rather than truth, safety rather than love. They are people who, in the words of the Gospel, “seek to save their life,” – to save their own skin – But, because they cling to the wrong kind of life, they wind up losing it – and if it were not for the cross of Christ, losing it for all eternity.

And, what is true of Pilate, and the High Priest, and the disciples, and the crowds, and the soldiers is certainly true of us. We come to the cross from our darkness. Yes, we are attracted to The One who is Light, and Love, and Joy, and Life, itself. Yes, we will follow him – but only so far. Church and Sunday School – in the right place, at the right time, and only on Sundays – yes, of course, that’s part of the polish we expect for ourselves and for our children. But, the real deal, the True Life that is received and nourished and set free to do the will of the Father who sends us all into the world to bring light, and understanding, and peace, and encouragement, and forgiveness of sins – well, NO, we probably won’t follow very long upon that road.

But, Jesus travels all the way. His life always comes from above. He constantly receives it from the will of the Father, and there is never a time when he refused to honor that will. He follows it through all the layers of human darkness. First, into the world in its self-satisfaction – then down to the outcasts and sinners – down through faithless friends – down through betrayal and false accusations – down into anguish and writhing pain. Down – Down – Down - How far can the Life that is from above reach down? Down into Hell – Down into the grave - Down to the stronghold of Death, itself – Down into the heart of The Great Refusal that has been humankind’s undoing from the very first – our refusal to simply be what we are meant to be, children of God and heirs of eternal life.

That’s what Jesus conquers, today – the great refusal of the human heart to find life in God, alone – to receive rather than to take – to be used rather than to exploit – to love rather than to persist in the isolation of our self-made, dying world. Today, we come from that world of our own darkness to stand at the foot of the cross. Here, the true light of God’s

unconquerable love shines upon us. Here, the bond of the life-giving Spirit – that wills to create and give us our life from above every day – here that bond holds fast. Here, death has done its worst and its power is drained away. Here, a man of flesh and blood is lifted high upon the cross – so that all who believe in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. Here, on the cross, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.” Here, at the foot of the cross, God longs to be in us. For, God will reach down into the furthest corners of our darkness, into our pain and into our longing. Here, at the foot of the cross, God is always willing to reconcile our poor life to His great love. Here, at the foot of the cross, God will break the bonds of our death and opens the tomb of our great refusal. Here, at the foot of the cross, we, too, can be reconciled to God.