

Good Friday 2013  
The Parish of St. Clement  
The Rev. Michael P. Barham

“Absolute attention is prayer.”

Simone Weil, a French philosopher and Christian mystic, once said "Absolute attention is prayer." Today, we come to try to give attention to a mystery, and that is our Good Friday prayer.

Here we are, at the cross. The state execution of a person assumed guilty by a local judicatory, determined guilty by an angry mob, and tortured and sent to death by a weak governor grasping for an expedient outcome to a political problem. How much of this was God's plan, and how much of this story was the plan of human beings whose hearts had become hardened, not by God, but by their own complicity with powers, structures, and systems of injustice?

Here we are at the cross. As post-Enlightenment, thinking Christians who value reason, like us good Episcopalians, one of the questions I am frequently asked is one of the *common questions of doubt* by believers, and one of the *common arguments against faith* by atheists, in technical jargon we call it the question of theodicy, the question of God's justice: If God is all-powerful and all-good, why do bad things happen to good people? We Christians, from the earliest of our scriptures – the letters of Paul – have continued to ask and address the question that punctuates books of the Old Testament as well – especially the book of Job. And yet it seems there are no adequate answers to fully lay to rest the question, because in each new generation, often more than once, we see personal tragedies and social atrocities that raise that question back from the dead.

Here we are at the cross. Whole strands of theology, many of which are being questioned today as inadequate, have been written in confident language: Christus Victor, the idea by Christ's death, Death itself was conquered, sin and evil defeated. Substitutionary Atonement, the idea that Christ died as punishment in substitution for our sins. Ransom atonement, the idea that Christ died to pay a ransom to the Devil who had kidnapped and enslaved us. In each of these answers, the death on the Christ is a pivotal moment in which there is a complete and universal act of salvation from death and the powers of evil.

That all sounds good on paper, but when we move from the text book to life, when the theology hits the road, moment after moment through time since the cross, all of these doctrinal answers come face to face again with the apparent victory of those very powers of oppression which the cross purportedly overcame. Every moment someone dies. Every moment drones

are flying around somewhere; guns are being sold and purchased and supplied with ammunition and are awaiting their moment to do what they were intended to do – to kill. Right now people are on death row in countries around the world. Right now, all types of injustice are being perpetuated in all manner of ways, and by all kinds of good, thoughtful, well-meaning Christians who are caught up complicit, intentionally or unaware, in the very governments and institutions and economies that are perpetuating them.

Here we are at the cross on Good Friday. The cross is there, of course, other day of the year, however blind we might wish to be to it, but nevertheless, today, we are here, and our liturgy and our readings demands our absolute attention to the instrument that Rome saw as an effective method of execution, that many saw as a stumbling block and as foolishness, that Paul saw as our glory. Here we are asked to stare into the eyes of our hearts, allowing the cross to impose on us the question of why God allowed this, or worse, may have thought it necessary, for this to happen. Is this the only way God could get our attention?

If so, did it even work?

Does it get our attention?

Here, at the cross, we are asked to see in ourselves the abandonment by the disciples, to see in ourselves the horror felt by the mother, to see in ourselves the despair felt by the beloved disciple, to see in ourselves all the characters who played their part in this passion of Christ. And now, here, we are to watch Christ die again in the lives of thousands who will die today, and in the lives of millions who are hungry, unsheltered, mistreated, raped, killed, addicted, and on, and on. At the foot of the cross we are to let all of that wash away for a few moments; all of the easy answers die on that cross. The power of all the world's sufferings die on that cross. The guilt of what we have done or left undone dies on that cross. All the things that distract us, misguide us, mal-form us and abuse us... die on that cross. And we are left, standing before this cross that mocks all that is wrong in the world and in our lives, with absolute silence.

If we are seeking peace, if we are seeking answers, if we are seeking power to conquer evil, we may need to give our absolute attention to the absolute silence of the cross. Then, perhaps, we can find the words to pray and the actions to embody that enable us to pick up our cross, and follow the one who calls us to be his disciples. Amen.