

GOOD FRIDAY, APRIL 10

I cannot compress the reality and richness of Good Friday into a brief note, but I do have a few observations that may help you focus your meditation and prayers today.

The Good Friday rite begins on p. 276 in the prayer book.

Though not included in the prayerbook, for over a thousand years, since the mid-ninth century CE, the Church has prayed and sung what are known as “The Reproaches from the Cross” (*Improperia Crucis*) during the liturgy of Good Friday (you can find them in translation through google). For many years I would lead them—in a modified form I developed that cast them as a rebuke to the Church—in the final section of a three hour Good Friday service (the service was built around what is laid out in our prayer book).

The Reproaches in their original form are nine complaints from God against Israel, drawn from a recounting of God’s rescue of Israel in Egypt and leading into the promised land. This recitation of God’s grief over Israel’s abandonment and rejection of God’s repeated call to covenant after showing the divine power and promise-keeping is immensely moving.

The text in its original is also deeply, tragically, flawed. Not for what it says, but for what is implied by what was left out.

The problem is that the focus of the Reproaches is on Israel, “the Jews”. The rejection, arrest, condemnation, trial, torture, and crucifixion was not an exclusively Jewish affair on several levels, as all four gospels are at some pains to show. The Reproaches leave out what one-time radio commentator Paul Harvey would call, “the rest of the story”.

Let’s remind ourselves that the ministry of Jesus was not exclusively to and for Jews. The trial at which Jesus was condemned to death was undertaken by the Roman authorities applying Roman law and penalties. The sentence was carried out by the Romans and it was they who authorized the deposition of Jesus’ body from the cross and his burial.

Yes, the Jewish Temple guard saw to the arrest at Gethsemane and the “arraignment” was done by the Jewish leadership, who then handed Jesus over to the Romans. Yes, the crowd at the trial cried out that Jesus should die for blasphemy that could be construed as sedition—and so, arguably—manipulated the proceedings.

And yes, as Jesus said more than once, rejecting him was rejecting the one who sent him, and that rejection was a choice, a deliberate act. So, those who rejected him—especially Jews who knew what he was talking about on the deeper level of his preaching—would be an especially appropriate part of the audience for the Reproaches. But, as I have said and repeat emphatically in my preaching for many years, not the only recipients.

The lesson here is that scapegoating is neither truthful nor helpful, and it contributes to and supports the historical obscenity of anti-semitism, which is one of the church's oldest and most deep-rooted sins. Good Friday is about the human family, not a particular set of our relatives.

So, whatever may be true in the Reproaches in their classical form—that God has cause for complaint against Israel—must be understood as PART of the truth. We have our place in this drama also.

Another deeply moving component of a Good Friday liturgy is singing the hymn “O sacred head sore wounded”, a powerful meditation on the reality of Christ's death as an offering for sin—including ours. Here, too, there is much truth. I have wept more than once singing this hymn. But, as with the Reproaches, we must understand that there is truth here as far as the text goes—but the text only goes part of the way.

This hymn is deliberately and purposefully personal and individual. No one, I would bet, can peruse this text and miss that the focus is on oneself: I have been a sinner, and by my sins I denied thee, I crucified thee! Can't miss the point here, can we? Others may have been the actual agents long ago and far away, but I in my sinfulness, I have condemned, tried, tortured, and killed my Lord. Heart-breaking stuff to be confronted with.

There are a couple of ways that looking at Good Friday with heavy emphasis on this theme can go off the rails. First, it can lead to morbid self-absorption. We lose track of how important we AREN'T. Yes, we are in the great story, but the story is not only about us, we are not in a two person play with God in the other role.

Another distortion happens when we start feeling and thinking that everything depends on us, when we over-estimate who we ARE: what we think we do, what we can do, what we actually do, and what importance there actually is in what we do. Each of us is vitally important. Every drop of rain matters to a garden, every straw contributes to the load on the proverbial camel's back, each brick is a piece of the wall.

But we are not the whole storm, the complete straw bale, the cornerstone of the arch.

Here we need to remind ourselves that if we focus overmuch on ourselves and our sinfulness, we lose sight of the historic and corporate nature of human sin. This leads to two problems: thinking we can disassociate ourselves from sin and thinking we stand outside of it all, that we are free agents.

We can't decide not to be sinners. We are, by our nature and by our circumstances, sinners. Moreover, we are sinners within a larger reality—which includes our social and historical settings—and that is inescapable.

This means that the whole ball of our desires, motivations, choices, judgments, and the decisions we make—consciously and unconsciously—are part of who we are, and we

understand those aspects of ourselves only partially. We see ourselves—in Paul’s words—only poorly and partially. This is a way of saying we don’t understand ourselves very well; at best we keep learning who we are, and sometimes we just don’t do the work of being a good person with much grace and skill. We have to admit we need mercy. A lot of mercy. And so we come before God with humility rather than with all the piling up of guilt that sometimes happens.

Another point must be made: we live and act within our social reality and status, we operate in life within structures and institutions. Therefore, we see things from our place in the world we occupy. So, we have the advantages and the limitations of our perspective. Really understanding this about ourselves and recognizing it at work in other people is one of the most important accomplishments of adulthood. It can be quite challenging and humbling to do this, and quite refreshing also.

As an example, consider that within our lifetimes our society has changed tremendously (not completely and not enough) but tremendously in how women, people of color, lgbt people, and people with disabilities are perceived—not least by themselves—and what their legal status and protections to establish equality are. I’m not going to try to go into this deeply, but will simply say that what is common place now in any field of endeavor or social situation with regard to the roles, competence, achievement, status, and horizon of persons who are not white men was, fifty years ago, regarded as a remarkable accomplishment. Now, we say it is “on the way to things getting better”, to the benefit of all, and we’re glad for it.

What this tells us is that our viewpoint here and now about almost anything is just that: our viewpoint here and now. As such, we must regard our outlook on ourselves and others as “under construction”. Which leads back to the hymn, “O sacred head sore wounded”. We have to include in our meditation about sin the realities I have just referred to, our setting with social and historic realities.

This doesn’t let us off the hook, so to speak, in terms of the hymn, but it does give nuance and depth—and perhaps room for compassion—to the declaration, “I crucified thee!”, and allows us to consider things historically. It is not too much to say that every generation of Christians must try to look at how we perceive Jesus and his passion.

Well, then, what are we to do with all of these ideas on this Good Friday?

I believe that the spiritual work of Good Friday should be on uniting ourselves with Christ in his death so that we appreciate our need to be redeemed and treasure what has been done to redeem us.

Much can be said, but rather than try to say more myself, I will turn to the prayerbook, pp 281-282

Anthem two (at the veneration of the cross):

We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you,
because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

If we have died with him, we shall also live with him;
if we endure, we shall also reign with him.

We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you,
because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, we pray you to set your passion, cross, and death between your judgment and our souls, now and in the hour of our death. Give mercy and peace to the living, pardon and rest to the dead; to your holy church peace and concord; and to us sinners everlasting life and glory; for with the Father and the Holy Spirit you live and reign, one God, now and forever. Amen

Oh yes, this also PART of the truth.