

Sermon for Good Friday

The Text: John 18 & 19

“The great reversal”

Last Sunday, Palm Sunday, drew us into the first ever Holy Week, right there among the throngs lining the streets. There was so much anticipation, hope, and euphoria as people enthusiastically welcomed Jesus entering Jerusalem waving Palm branches and strewing their cloaks over the road, making the best red carpet they could at the time.

How quickly things change! Less than a week on, there is a complete reversal. Instead of crowds welcoming Jesus by carrying palm leaves, soldiers came to arrest Jesus, carrying torches, lanterns, and weapons. In the beginning God expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, but now it is the Son of God who is driven out of the Garden of Gethsemane, bound, arrested and taken to the High Priest Caiaphas, prior to being put on trial before the Roman Governor Pilate. There's an astonishing reversal of the public support for Jesus heard in the shouts of adoration “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” and appeals for his help: “Hosanna!” Insults now fly from all directions rather than the glad hosannas that rang out on Sunday. Even Peter, who previously confessed to Jesus: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!” (Matthew 16:16), now denies Jesus publicly, three times.

Tossed to and fro by fickleness, crowds who cheered for Jesus, the source of divine blessing, cheer for an insurrectionist who had taken part in an uprising. “Do you want me to release ‘the king of the Jews’?” Pilate asked. “No! Not him! Give us Barabbas!” they shout. It seems like it's ‘all aboard’ the Barabbas bandwagon. Maybe they see him as having more credibility than Jesus to affect the political liberation they want, given that's the very thing Barabbas has been arrested for. He's now their champion and he's the one who ends up going free, while they viciously shout for Jesus to die.

There was a complete reversal of justice that day. Everyone wanted Jesus dead. Satan wanted Jesus dead, having tempted Judas to betray Jesus. Judas wanted Jesus dead, for the gain of thirty pieces of silver. The shepherds of Israel who were supposed to lead the people to their Christ, wanted Jesus dead, calling for his crucifixion. Pilate who, although he found no basis for a charge against the innocent Jesus, wanted Jesus dead, out of concern to appease the crowd for his own self-preservation. The crowd wants Jesus dead: “Crucify him!” they roar.

Jesus' own Father wanted him dead too. He stood back when Jesus was on the Cross, even when Jesus cried out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" God sent his own Son into the world and to the Cross to die there in the most unjust and unfair of circumstances. The source of living water said: "I thirst" as he hung, dehydrating on the Cross. The One who turned water into the choicest of wine at the wedding at Cana now has a sponge of wine vinegar lifted up to his lips on the stalk of a hyssop plant. Then, when he had received the drink, Jesus bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Why *did* God send his own Son into the world to die? God did that to reverse the situation between us and himself. In the beginning, God spoke, and everything came into existence just how he had told it to. When the commands of God are obeyed, the result is good! God saw everything he had made, and it was all good—very good. There was nothing not as God had intended, and there was nothing left to do or add that could make his creation any better, because it was complete. So God rested from his work of creation, because it was all finished, and it was all good. Very good.

But it wasn't long before what God had created to be very good turned very bad, through no fault of God's. The word of God was not obeyed. Satan tempted Adam and Eve: "Did God *really* say?" Did God really mean it?...God loves you doesn't he? Why *wouldn't* he want you to do that? "*You will not surely die!*"

We know what happened next - not good. Adam and Eve's attempt at hiding from God and covering up their sin were, from that moment, part of the human DNA. King David confessed: "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:5). Since that time, it hasn't been good. Psalm 14 echoes like the blow of a judge's gavel:

The LORD looks down from heaven
on all mankind
to see if there are any who understand,
any who seek God.
All have turned away, all have become corrupt;
there is no one who does good,
not even one. (Psalm 14:2-3)

The turning away from God that began with Adam and Eve and continues with the whole human race means that in our natural state we are enemies with God. Here in today's Gospel reading from John 18 & 19, we see that enmity in the darkest ways, as human beings turn away from God all over again by betraying Jesus, arresting him, denying him, mocking him, rejecting him...and crucifying him. There is injustice, exploitation, violence, abuse, mockery by mere humans blinded by, and lost in, self-absorption. There was not a hallowing of God's name that day.

The people would have Barabbas as their saviour, and themselves as the final authority, but not God. They want to do away with Jesus. And they do.

The Passion narrative in John 18 & 19 is really a snapshot of the human heart. Like Adam and Eve, we turn from God when we want what we want instead of what God wants. We are just like those in the crowds who shouted, 'Crucify him!' every time we wish Jesus just fell silent, like he did before Barabbas, and we had the final say.

But God was determined to bring the reversal of the power and consequences of sin, death and the devil in our lives. The events that unfold in today's Passion narrative are not by chance. That day on the Cross, God in Christ triumphed over sin by the outpouring of his own holy and precious blood, the once for all perfect sacrifice to bring forgiveness from God and reconciliation and peace with him.

The Apostle Paul puts it this way: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). By paying the wages of sin for us, Jesus trampled over death by his own death, and made a mockery of the kingdom of darkness, rescuing us from the grip of Satan, to bring us into the kingdom of light.

Your situation has been completely reversed. God in Christ exchanged places with you and took upon himself your sin and clothed you with his very own righteousness, so that you are now recipients of God's mercy, compassion, favour and help. Simply through faith in the precious blood of Christ to save you, you have peace with God, and you are not only his friend, but just like Jesus, you are now the Father's dearly loved and holy child too, with access to all his riches in heaven.

There is no going back by God now. No possibility of overturning what he has done for you. His saving work for you is complete - "It is finished" Jesus says, through parched lips from the Cross. They are words reminiscent of the beginning, when God rested from his work of creating, because he had completed everything that he had intended, and saw all that he had made and declared it to be very good. So too is his work of Redemption complete in Christ crucified. He left nothing undone to save you and for you to know him and his blessing. There is nothing more that needs to be added to his work. God finished it, for you, and it is good—very good.

In Christ even the words of Satan's temptation to Adam and Eve: "You will surely not die" are flipped on their head to be gospel: you will not surely die...because the sinless Son of God took upon himself your sin and died for you that through faith in him you will live forever, sharing in Christ's own victory and his holiness. God is good. Today is good...a very Good Friday indeed! Amen.