

St Patrick's Cathedral, Good Friday, 11.15, 22 April 2011

Preached by Canon J.R. Bartlett, formerly Precentor of Christ Church

I Cor.1.22-25: We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

I expect that many of you have one way or another this week followed the early church's story of what Jesus said and did in the first Holy Week – his entry to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the disturbance in the temple when he ejected the money-changers, the teaching in public and private, the very private last supper with his disciples; and now, on what we call Good Friday, the very public finale on the cross. But how did those first Christians understand the death of Jesus on the cross? How do we understand it? How does his crucifixion do anything for us?

Basically, there are events, things that happen, and there are interpretations of events. Events are ambiguous and demand interpretation. To contemporary Romans and Jews, crucifixion meant the shameful punishment for runaway slaves or political rebels. The early Christians would hardly have invented that embarrassing fate for their founder; but they didn't play it down. They had to explain it. So the crucifixion figures large in all four gospels; John's gospel even presents it as

the hour of Jesus' glory, and Paul plays with the paradox that here on the cross, where Jesus was humanly powerless, could be seen the power and wisdom of God. And so Christians made the cross their great symbol, and your Dean had it erected for all to see, shining brightly on the spire of this cathedral.

The crucifixion story contains some puzzles. Why do Matthew, Mark and Luke set the crucifixion on one date, the day of the Passover feast itself, and John on the afternoon before Passover feast itself? (They can't both be right.) Perhaps John is making a subtle theological point, implicitly comparing Jesus' death with the slaughter of the lambs for the Passover feast that evening. Another puzzle is whom should we blame, historically, for the crucifixion of Jesus? Crucifixion was a Roman practice, and Jesus died *sub Pontio Pilato*, under the title 'King of the Jews', apparently as a rebel against Rome; but he was clearly unpopular with the Jewish authorities, and collusion cannot be ruled out. And perhaps Jesus himself, who took physical action against the Temple, brought it on himself to some extent; the gospels at least present him as expecting to die in Jerusalem.

But what matters is what this death of Jesus meant for his followers. They asked themselves, Why should such a righteous person die? Why do the righteous suffer? asked the Psalmist (Ps.37, Ps.

73). The first Christians saw Jesus first and foremost as a suffering righteous man. Luke makes the centurion say 'Truly this was a righteous man', and makes Jesus on the cross cry out, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?', a quotation from Ps 22, which describes the plight of a suffering righteous man who had put his trust in God. Early Christian belief about the cross began with the thought that here was a righteous person suffering unjustly. They didn't know why the righteous suffered, but they did expect that in the end justice would prevail and the victim would get his deserts, usually on earth (as in the case of Job) but sometimes elsewhere; the souls of the righteous would be in the hand of God and there no torment should touch them. And the early Christians knew that Jesus was even now resurrected, sitting at the right hand of God; the righteous sufferer had been vindicated by God. That is where their thoughts started.

But they went further; they began to say that 'he died **for us**'. Why did they think that, and what did they mean? This is where the whole Christian theology of what we call the Atonement begins, with those two tiny words '**for us**'. In Greek, 'on our behalf' (and NOT 'instead of us'). Perhaps they said that he died for us because they knew that Jesus always had acted for others, through his healings, his exorcisms, his friendship with sinners and outcasts. So in some way his death was a natural conclusion to that sacrificial life. Perhaps they were influenced, too, by the words Jesus used at the Last Supper, 'This is my body, which is **for you**; this cup is the new covenant in my

blood' (I Cor 11.24), words which seem to link Jesus' death with the theme of redemption and salvation symbolised by the Jewish feast of the Passover, which recalled God's rescue of the Jews from Egypt. So Paul came to see Jesus as 'our Passover, sacrificed **for us**'. And then there is that other famous saying of Jesus (Mark 10.45), 'The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom **for many**'. The Greek word behind the English 'ransom' there probably suggested to the first Christians the idea of God's rescuing of the Israelites from Egypt – Jesus' ministry was one of serving his people and freeing them from bondage at the cost of his life.

The whole ministry of Jesus was one of service, and it is not surprising that the early Christians saw his death in that light also. His death was **for us**, in some mysterious way. And the early Christians began to see that various parts of the Jewish scriptures could appropriately be used to describe Jesus – especially the famous words from Isaiah ch. 53 about the prophetic figure usually called the Suffering Servant:

Surely he has borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows?...
He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities...
Though he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth....
He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

There is no sure evidence that Jesus used these words of himself, but within two generations Christian writers were picking up these words and applying them to Jesus, as in 1 Peter 2:21-24:

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin; no guile was found upon his lips. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

Here an early Christian theologian reflects on the meaning of Christ's death, meditating on the words of Isaiah; and he says Christ's sufferings and behaviour under torture are an example for us to follow. This is the beginning of Christian theology of the atonement: and it is pithily summed up in the famous hymn

Take up thy cross, the Saviour said,
If thou wouldst my disciple be;
Deny thyself, the world forsake,
And humbly follow after me.

The story of the cross is painful for Christians; understanding it is hard for Christians (why should a good God require such pain?); following the way of the cross is extraordinarily hard, and few of us, if we are honest, do it with any great depth of personal sacrifice, though we recognise it as an ideal. And perhaps the cross touches us because we understand with the Roman poet Virgil that with life as a whole

Sunt lacrimae rerum mentem et mortalia tangunt

Things have tears, and mortal things touch the mind.

The way of Christ is about the human condition; the cross of Christ is for us, and cannot be avoided. If we have to suffer, we know that Christ has been there first, that suffering is part of creation, that suffering has to condition our view of God; and that even if we do not know why the righteous suffer, suffering and righteousness cannot be separated. That is part and parcel of what the cross is about. It doesn't separate suffering and God; it links them. So what the story of the cross does for us first and foremost is this: it reminds us that even in God's case, helping and serving the world necessarily involves suffering; suffering is a necessary prelude to salvation.

