

Lent V (25-03-07)

“having obtained eternal redemption for us” (Hebrews 9)

We are now in Passiontide, contemplating Christ’s suffering and death for us. The physical and mental horrors are easy enough for us to appreciate, but there were many cruel deaths then, as there are now. The point is not that Jesus suffered more than anybody else - how could we know this? - but that there was meaning and purpose in the suffering. Yet all too often there is evil meaning and purpose – is that better or worse than meaningless? We do not have to decide, for here we are contemplating a good meaning and purpose.

Jesus was not just a passive victim, but chose a faithfulness to his Father’s will which was always likely to lead to death. (This is not the same as choosing death - he was no suicide.) A reckless obedience, perhaps, but an obedience to the Father’s will which he rightly knew to be good, indeed best. Suffering and death is what the world may inflict on those who reject its values. We have to follow him in that obedience, cost what it might.

Jesus was not just a passive victim, but engaged, both in his earthly ministry and in his death, in a bitter struggle with evil. An old hymn puts it thus:

“Death and life have contended,
In that combat stupendous.
The Prince of Life, who died, reigns immortal.”

The power of evil, of the futility of an existence which has no purpose and ends in nothingness, could only be broken on its own terms. Death could indeed kill Jesus; death could not keep him dead. So much for the meaningless. But beware of it at all times, for it has become one of the strongest weapons of the tempter. Not directly the temptation to do something you know to be evil; just the drift into 'recognizing' that nothing matters.

If the meaningless, the terrible strength of nothing, is one danger, it is not for lack of simple evil. So the taunts which St. John records in the Gospel are very apposite. Jesus is a Samaritan, a heretic – he chooses error. No, he honours his Father. And in league with devils - with evil personified. No, he is before all others faithful to the Father. Faith is not just having the right opinions; “honouring” the Father is not just about showing verbal respect, but about working this out in life - in actions and in prayer, for prayer is that active dependence on the Father without which there may indeed be good deeds, but not the good life. We honour our Father (as Christ honoured “My Father”) when the Lord’s Prayer leads us into the Lord’s life. Be well aware what you ask for! There are many prayers much less radical than the Lord's Prayer.

But the Epistle gives us another aspect of the Passion. The death is an offering - a sacrifice. Now there is a rabbinic tradition that those facing capital punishment in Jewish practice were told to say “May my death be an atonement for Israel”, so that even the death of a criminal might be turned to some good (both for the criminal and the nation). So Christ, dying the death of a criminal, will make good that hope of atonement, of restoring the relationship between God and man, by his offering of himself.

We do not believe that the Father had to be persuaded out of his anger with us by this offering; if He did not love us, he would never have sent his Son. But from early in the Old Covenant he had given his people various forms of sacrifice, various gestures, various institutions such as priesthood, as tokens by which they could approach him. We must not be wiser than God and demand a more “rational” solution. Nor must we imagine that there is no problem to be solved. Access to God is not a human right! The broken relationship has to be painfully rebuilt. God does not need any intermediate steps from his side, but we do from ours. For we start not as persons of dignity but as damaged goods. And undoing the damage is a task almost as old as humanity itself, in so far as the problem is collective. It is a life-long task, even for the Christian.

And the way of that rebuilding is in the end God’s own doing; in his Son, totally human and yet totally with the Father, the gulf is bridged again. All the gestures of the Old Covenant are summed up (both perfected and finished) in the One Offering.

What we do here in this Eucharist is not something separate, a new twist on the sacrifices of the Old Covenant, but Christ (and not any work of mine or ours) making present to us the offering which he made once for all, in time but with eternal effect.

The Epistle is Galatians 4.21-31 ; the Gospel is John VI.1-14. I have no sermons for Palm Sunday and the rest of Holy Week because the liturgies are too long in themselves.