

Good Friday
St Luke's, Tutshill, 2024

Isaiah 52:13 – 53-end.

The Passion According to St John

O thou, Master Carpenter of Nazareth,
Who on the Cross in wood and iron
wrought our whole salvation,
Wield well, we pray thee, thy tools in this thy workshop,
So that we who come rough-hewn to thy bench
May by thy touch be fashioned into a truer beauty
And a greater usefulness;
We ask it in thy Name. Amen.

Henri Nouwen, the great spiritual director and teacher of prayer of the last century famously said that you need to be really careful before saying anything definite about God, because God is so unlike us. And he repeated the old Indian tale about four blind men who were asked to identify something by touch. What was put in front of them was an elephant. The first man, reaching out his hand to try to feel what this animal might be found the trunk, and concluded that there was a snake in front of him. The second man found the tail, and concluded that there was a rope there. The third man, finding one of the elephant's enormous legs, was fairly sure that he was identifying a tree. And the fourth man, finding the broad rough side of the elephant's body, wondered whether he might be standing in front of a wall.

Nouwen's point, which the much older Indian folktale was also making, was that God is not like us, and that our journey of faith is about slowly identifying more and more about God, but also recognising that ultimately, we can never see the whole picture

on this side of the grave. Until the Kingdom comes, all of our knowledge is partial - it is helpful to share our finding with each other as well, in beginning to put the pieces of our faith together, but even then our knowledge is partial, and incomplete.

Henri Nouwen suggests that there are four things of which we *can* be reasonably certain concerning God, and you won't be surprised to learn that at the centre of all four is Christ. He says that firstly God is with us. Secondly God is personal. Thirdly, God is hidden. And finally, God is looking for us.

We might just want to reflect on those, on this Good Friday. God is with us. God is personal. God is hidden. God is looking for us.

There is so much about today that is mysterious. That is partially hidden from us, at least on this side of the coming of the Kingdom. As we will sing in a few moments time, 'we may not know, we cannot tell what pain he had to bear.' The mysterious operation of the Cross is a wonder, and a mystery. At a certain point today our knowledge, our rational understanding of what is happening, simply has to give way to wonder and awe, which is why actually all the events of Holy Week lead up to the moment, shortly, where we simply fall silent in front of the Cross. We can't think our way through the amazing love of God. We can't theologially manage it. And that's why, in a moment, after the cross has been brought in and we have done some singing and saying, we will simply fall silent, and be invited, if we would like to, just come up and stand or kneel before the instrument of Christ's death and our redemption, or perhaps gently touch it, or just take a moment to sink into that mysterious silence.

It's also why I've chosen to finish today's service with William Walshaw Howe's great hymn, which reflects on the mystery and unknowing of this: 'I cannot tell why he should love a child like me so full of sin; his love must be so wonderful if he could die my love to win.' But yet... 'But yet, I *want* to love thee Lord, O light a flame within my heart.'

What we are doing today is recognising the huge mystery at the heart of our faith. That we are redeemed by love. That the truth of Good Friday is that weakness is stronger than strength. That life is stronger than death. That love is stronger than hate. That all of the things that the world believed *then*, and still believes *now*, are the powerful weapons of victory - strength, hate, might, death, dominance... All the things we see in operation all over the world in countless ghastly human conflicts... That all these things are in fact overcome by self-giving. By simple, uncomplicated, love. That in the face of all of that strength and hate and might and death and dominance Christ would simply accept it, and love it, and forgive it, and redeem it. That is what the cross is a symbol of, and why we fall silent before it this afternoon.

We can't rationalise that. We can't tie it up in a neat bow and explain it. 'It is a thing most wonderful.'

Thomas Merton, a Cistercian monk of the last century famously said, 'Lord, I don't know how to please you, but I think the fact that I *want* to please you pleases you.' Lord, I don't know how to please you, but I think the fact that I *want* to please you pleases you. That's actually all that is required of us today. To want to please God. To want to love him. 'And yet I *want* to love thee, Lord; O light a flame within my heart.' We don't come to the cross full of answers. We come to the cross full of our own weakness and betrayals, carrying all of those dark parts of

ourselves that we kid ourselves that no one else knows about: our selfish ambitions, our fantasies, our indolence, our irritation with our brothers and sisters, our – what the Prayer Book used to call – vainglory, our pomp; we just have to lay them honestly at Christ's cross.

We lay them before the Cross of the One who, in his own last moments cried out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' And so he echoes our own cries in those moments of darkness that we would rather not show to our friends in church – because we prefer our faith to appear strong and secure and all sewn up - . But that is not the Christ we worship. The Christ we worship feels abandoned. The Father feels hidden from him. And that is the key. This is why Christmas finds its culmination here on the hill far away. God who is *really* incarnate, *really* feels abandoned. *Really* feels deserted. That is so important because it means that all of those feelings, all of that journey, all of *our* nervousness and faltering and loss is also gathered up on the Cross, and harrowed in hell, and redeemed and raised on Easter Day.

Henri Nouwen goes on to say, 'When Jesus echoed these words [from Psalm 22 – "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me"] on the Cross, total aloneness and full acceptance touched each other. In that moment of complete emptiness, all was fulfilled. In that hour of darkness, new light was seen, where death was witnessed, life was affirmed. Where God's absence was most loudly proclaimed, God's presence was most profoundly revealed.'

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I said earlier that Nouwen's four truths about God were that God is with us, God is personal, God is hidden, and God is searching for us.

And we see how all of these are true at the Cross. The incarnate God of Christmas, the personal God in the man Jesus, at that moment of isolation and abandonment where God feels utterly hidden, as the sky turns black, and Jesus dies, carrying all of our darkness with him to the dead: in a mysterious, wonderful paradox, we find that God has not abandoned us, God is not distant - God is searching for us. Searching for us, with the promise of a garden, and grave-clothes folded, and a new day.

Amen.