

Good Friday 2017.2

I wonder what you see when you look at the cross behind me. Do you see the Son of God suffering in the place of humanity – the willing victim of the hard righteousness of his father? Do you see an innocent and good man who was crushed by the forces of power and oppression of his time? Do you see a victim of your own selfishness – a figure who your sins helped nail to the wood? Do you see yourself, battered by the violence and selfishness of our world as you hang and suffer in the midst of it?

I'm going to share with you a little of what I see – and of what I don't. Share a little of what I believe this image tells us of the deepest being of God herself.

Firstly, I do not see the vengeance of God at work in the cross. I believe it is completely wrong – completely unethical - to see in Jesus on the cross the working out of God's righteous wrath against humanity. However often you may have been told that God punished Jesus in our place, do not believe it. That would be the work of an unjust God – punishing the innocent in order to set free the guilty – of an angry God – demanding pain in order to satisfy some primitive blood-lust – of a child-abusing God – inflicting terrible grief on his own son in order to satisfy his own needs. This is NOT the God we believe in and follow.

Clear that image from your mind's eye and look again.

One thing I do see is the figure of an innocent man crushed by the unjust oppressive forces of his time. I see in this crucified body the bodies of abused women, of child slaves, of tortured prisoners, of despairing refugees – of all those trampled by other people's lust for power and control. This is a sight to make us weep, and then to make us angry, and then to make us act.

How many more in our world will die at the hands of violence in 2017? How many more innocent women and men will hang upon their own crosses this year alone?

And so I do also see in this figure on this cross a victim of my own selfishness. Of my deep-seated preference for my own comfort above the survival of others. Of my laziness in making consumer choices that answer my wants but ignore the rights of those working for slave wages or sinking under piles of toxic trash. I – all of us here – are trapped in unjust structures that we did not create. But that does not let us off the hook of working to change them whenever we can. If we do not do this – if our weeping and our anger do not lead to action – then we cannot deny our partial culpability for the crosses of our world.

And yet, like many of you, I can also see myself as the one hanging on the cross. The one who sometimes feels abandoned by God and by those I love, who is afraid and vulnerable and hurting. The one who feels helpless against the forces of hatred and oppression that constantly batter our hearts and minds and bodies. My life has been blessed and my suffering is mild and muted compared to so many. But most of us, and some in bitter destructive ways, have known the desolation that this cross signifies.

And all this leads me to the heart of what I see upon the cross. The heart of why I believe this cross, for all its terrible darkness and desolation, is fundamentally good news. I see God.

I see God. Not a God of anger and punishment but a God of vulnerability and passionate, profligate love. Not a God who is male, despite the masculinity of the figure, but a God who is human. Not a God who is helpless, despite the acceptance of suffering and death, but a God who is transformative.

And how does God transform us? How does the God who became human help us become divine? God shows us that we are not deserted, not abandoned. That however acute the pain we are going through we do not face it alone. God shows us that power and invulnerability are not the greatest goods - that they fade into nothing compared to pure profligate love. God shows us that her arms are open to embrace all of suffering humanity.

But that's not quite enough. Lovely and inspiring, but just not quite enough. And that's why this dark and desolate cross is not the end of the story. The crucified one doesn't stay there, held in perpetual pain. The crucified one is also the risen one, the one who comes back to us breathing forgiveness and grace, the one who never forsakes the humanity who hurt and killed him but takes that humanity into the very being of God.

For the cross behind me is not the whole picture. It is a crucial point in a story that began with God becoming human. A story that continues with life restored and humanity carried into the heart of God at the resurrection and ascension.

So whatever you see on this cross, do not let it be all you see. Look through it as well as at it to the God who it helps define but who it does not contain. The God who created us, created you, for joy and life, not for suffering and death. The God who calls us to be people who learn from the truth of the cross but who live in the truth of the resurrection.