

Good Friday – the meaning of the Cross

St James, Colwall, 2nd April 2010

Sometime about A.D. 30 a charismatic preacher named Jesus of Nazareth died, crucified by the Roman authorities. What's so special about that? The Romans crucified thousands in their time and it was not at all uncommon. For Christians of course, that event was the most significant thing that has ever happened, but it is quite difficult to explain to non-Christians exactly why we believe that. I suppose many might be tempted to point to the resurrection as showing this event was supremely important. I think this is true but it is not necessarily the best way into convincing someone of the importance of the crucifixion. No one is going to believe in the resurrection without a mountain of evidence, and after 2000 years that is simply not available. You can only come to an understanding of the resurrection once you have understood what the crucifixion was all about.

For this I think you need to understand how revolutionary the teaching of Jesus was. Jesus teaching grew out of the Jewish law, but it transcended it and dealt in principles rather than detailed rules. Nobody today has superseded the sermon on the Mount. and at its time it was extraordinary. Looking at the culture around then it is easy to forget how different Roman values were from our own. The Romans had a different attitude to death and thought it quite entertaining to see gladiators fight to the death. The Roman virtue was fortitude in the face of death and compassion merely a sign of weakness. Throughout history, cultures around the world differ widely in their values from the relatively gentle but passive culture of the Buddhists to the bloodthirsty use of human sacrifice by the Aztec and other American cultures. Today we have suicide bombers and the concept of honour killing reflecting values which are totally different from the Christian ones.

Of course Christians have not always followed the teaching of Jesus but this does not change how revolutionary and different the teaching of Jesus actually was. In our society Christian values have become accepted, if not always followed, and people do not realise how pervasive this influence has been. Christian values are not natural. I was interested recently to hear Stephen Fry arguing with Anne Widdicombe and saying that you only had to look within yourself to find the rules of good behaviour, which only goes to show how clever people can still make extremely stupid statements. The Nazis looked within themselves and found racism and genocide and history bears out that there is seemingly no end to the evil lurking in our hearts.

So Jesus came with a revolutionary message, but how does this explain the crucifixion? I think it is best understood as a collision between the forces of evil and the power of good. The forces of evil are within us. We all recognise Christ's teaching but often fail to follow it, as soon as it begins to cost us effort, or time, or the sacrifice of something we like. Just take climate change as a current example. People are reluctant to do anything about it because they think it will lead to unpleasant changes in their lifestyle, but it is actually threatening

other people's lives. We are always ready to think that the sermon on the Mount does not apply to us but to other people. And if there are vested interests as well then opposition can amount to downright hostility.

We have to remember that the people who shouted, 'Hosanna to the King of Kings' on Palm Sunday, later on shouted, 'Crucify him', on Good Friday. There is evil within us and evil within our society. I read an interesting remark recently from someone who had visited Auschwitz. They criticised the presentation of the Memorial there, because the story being told placed the listener in the role of the victim, rather than that of the guards, or the people whose compliance led to the genocide. We are all implicated in the terrible things that go on in the world because we do so little to stop them. And it would be naive to imagine that the Nazi party could not have been formed in England.

When you look at the crucifixion you are looking at a mirror. It is not a distant event in a foreign country but something that has its origins within our human nature. The crucifixion was an inevitable outcome of the Incarnation – foreseen, but not foreordained, by God. As Jesus said the Son of Man is come to give his life a ransom for many. And that ransom was paid to the forces of evil which lie within our hearts and within our society. If we are to understand the message of the teaching of Christ and the nature of God that the teaching and the life and death of Christ convey, then that ransom must be paid.

I think it is important to emphasise that this revelation about the nature of God is so different from people's expectations and inclinations. If you look at other religions you will see an image of God either as a sort of beneficent guardian angel ready to intervene on behalf of his chosen followers, or alternatively as a malignant spirit needing to be appeased. Neither reflects the reality the cross conveys, of God sharing and understanding our nature and demonstrating the power of forgiveness and of not returning evil for evil.

Given this understanding of the crucifixion we can begin to understand the resurrection. The resurrection is a demonstration that the power of good is greater than the power of evil. The good is external: it comes from God; it is eternal. The evil is within us, temporal and transitory. The resurrection is a demonstration not so much of a conflict between two similar powers, as of heaven breaking through into this tawdry and mundane world. It's a message of hope that the evils of this world can be overcome by following the cross.

Is it a fairy story? Was it something invented by early Christians to encourage themselves? Well I put it on a different level from the stories we tell about Christmas which it doesn't really matter whether they are true or not. We do not know exactly what went on at the resurrection but that Jesus lives is something you can believe in and trust, once you understand that Jesus is the son of God. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – to transform our lives. Let us thank God that that is so, but let us also not forget the challenge it faces us with.