

"...breathed His last..."

Luke 23:26-43; Luke 23:44-56

Good Friday, the darkest day in the Christian year. "If we were to gaze upon...the crucified Jesus of the Romanesque era (C11th/C12thAD) we would see Christ on the cross with a majestic air - head upright with no crown of thorns, eyes open and gazing mercifully upon the world He is renewing and redeeming. He may be draped in a royal garment with a purple sash around His waist. There are faint signs of blood on His hands and feet."ⁱ This is the image from John's Gospel, a Jesus Who is in control of His fate, even to the point of choosing when He dies, declaring, "It is finished."

Christians should also see Jesus, the suffering servant, the lamb taken to slaughter, the one chosen by God to bear the transgressions of many. The innocent is condemned; the man of peace is put to a violent death. The heavy wooden cross, the crown of thorns, the nails, the sweat, the blood, the muck of death; the breaking, tortured, dying body, breathing its last. For It is too much to bear. This is the image from Luke's Gospel.

There is little doubt, as reported by Jewish and pagan historians, that Jesus was crucified as a political criminal by the Romans. While some Jewish leaders of the time accused Him, it was the Romans who killed Him. The life was real. The death was real.

For all the advances in medical science we have witnessed in our lifetimes, even when they bring cures, or coping mechanisms for pain and disease, the inevitability of death remains. Though pain may be controlled and suffering eased, the stark reality of death confronts, upsets, and unsettles us. If we are privileged, and it is a terrible thing but a privilege nonetheless, to be with someone

at the end, as they breathe their last, we come up hard against the limit of what humanity can do to stave off. Death comes to claim, and we are powerless to prevent it.

On Good Friday, on the outskirts of Jerusalem, amidst the rubbish and rubble of the city, distant from the habitation of humanity, the place of execution, Golgotha, The Skull, "...there they crucified Him..." Surrounded by two criminals, the Roman soldiers performing the execution, a centurion, crowds, and "...all His acquaintances and the women who had followed Him from Galilee stood at a distance and saw these things."

His mother, Mary, standing, weeping, collapsing, silenced by the dying of her boy, '*Stabat Mater, dolorosa, juxta crucem lacrymosa, dum pendebat filius.*' The Mother of Sorrows stood weeping by the Cross on which her Son was hanging.

Seeing and hearing:

His words, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

His words to the penitent thief, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

His clothes gambled for; the vinegar proffered; the mocking of His kingship; the darkness falling on the land; and stories of the curtain of the Temple being torn in two, so God's presence/absence could no longer be hidden.

The loud voice crying out, not whispering, but ***crying out***, from Psalm 31, "Father, into Thy hands I commit My Spirit!"

And having said that He breathed His last.

A few months ago, I had a run of funerals the like of which I don't think I have ever had in my ministry. Mostly for people I knew from the congregation in Morningside. There have been equal periods of sadness at Greenbank when the well-known and much-loved have died. We may want to say, 'celebration of life', and, 'thanksgiving', but truth be told each death diminished families

and friends and colleagues and congregations. In our creeds we may say, 'And the life everlasting', but for most the struggle is with life, and death, in the present. The denial, anger, bargaining, depression that goes around breathed *his*/breathed *her* last.

We may not stand physically around the foot of the cross in C1st AD Palestine, but by God most of us know something of the harrowing devastation of bereavement, its ups, and its downs, and its ups again. We fill the event with rituals to ease our pain and give us something to do, most of which were denied to the dead Jesus and His grief-stricken friends. The flowers and cards, the services and music, the words of tribute, the gatherings with family and friends, the sorting of personal belongings and clothes, the rearrangement of life into a new pattern, with the furniture of loss to accommodate now.

Faith is hard. Why has this happened? Why to them? Why to me? Why now? What could I have done more to stop it? What signs did I miss? Not realising, perhaps, that breathing our last comes to us all. We are not in control in the end of the lives of the dying, and of our own lives.

The reality of death is hard. It is maybe also true to say that at such times the reality of faith, of belief, is harder still. To let go, if that is what we struggle with. To pick up, take up something new and different, if that is what we resist.

"...He breathed His last."

I cannot speak for you, and your struggles with this great darkness, but only for myself. Death comes in many guises: not only the loss of loved ones which tears at the heart, but also those times when dreams crumble in our hands; and hope flickers out in our hearts; when disappointment in others and in myself floods over; when plans worked hard over come to nothing; when others do not see what I see and the possibility of moving on and up and out is stalled. There are many deaths at work in life, not simply a seemingly endless procession of

funerals that crowd the diary until I found myself sick to death of death. Again and again, I find myself standing at the foot of the cross, where, "...He breathed His last." The stultifying repetition of each little Good Friday where breath fails, and what is left for me is to follow to a rock-hewn tomb, filled with what I have lost, and the great stones of grief and frustration and pain rolled over breath-less hopes and dead dreams.

Then this Good Friday passage from Luke comes, to where I am stopped in my tracks, and makes me wonder, and think, and feel. Not to smooth over the harsh reality of death, but to peer into it and acknowledge it, and find, well, what? That witnessing death is necessary in order to be a witness to resurrection.ⁱⁱ "...He breathed His last." Because something stopped, finished, ended, if not straight away, I know, but at some point, things move.

At Christ's death, darkness descends, recalling the darkness preceding Creation, when out of chaos comes light. The curtain in the Temple is torn, God is no longer hidden behind barriers, nothing can stand in His way, for God is fully available to everyone. The last breath comes, and the body of Jesus dies, and falls into the hands of His Father, and is held in death, in the tomb, where with the Father the dead Christ is not alone.

And there I wait, wondering, thinking, feeling. I know, you know, what Christians believe comes next. It's hard to say light, hope, life, resurrection in the darkness of Good Friday, but by God, *by God*, it *is* there, somewhere. The death is real, breathing His last is real, but so also, I believe, is what will come in three days' time.

The cross stands at the heart of the Christian story. Luke's Gospel speaks constantly about surprise. The unexpected birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, heralded by angels and shepherds. The Jesus Who is the embodiment of parables that speak of the lost and found, and kindness and compassion, with

surprise after surprise. The surprising Jesus playing host in heaven to the poor, the blind, the lame, and a fellow criminal on a cross. Where the last become first and the first become last.

Do I believe it? Do you believe it? Do we live it? Each Good Friday we walk stumbling through the darkness and pain. From the foot of the Cross to a rock tomb, and a stone rolled over blocking out light and life and hope, and in the end, death.

And then? And then?

Wait with us tomorrow night with readings and music.

And then? And then?

Easter.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ *Philip D Krey, Feasting on the Word, Lenten Companion, p269*

ⁱⁱ Fred B Craddock, Luke, p275