The Wrong Message

The Roman executioners often crucified people on elevated spots near major roads, to serve as a warning of the fate of anyone who challenged authority. Dissenters or revolutionaries were not tolerated. The upright poles, for example, were left standing, not just for efficiency but as enduring reminders of what happened to those who bucked the system. Golgotha, the Place of the Skull, where Jesus was crucified, was one such place.

In Jesus’ case, the Romans certainly failed – the message of the Cross has been enduring but not the deterrent they envisaged. It has become a potent reminder of the power of love not hate, a reminder of the power of dissent, not blind submission or conformity, the power of commitment to justice and peace over acceptance of the status quo, not dominance, the power of giving one’s life in the service of others, rather than the pursuit of ‘position’ and status.

Jesus came to teach us how to live. He lived a life of compassion, of love for others. He told stories about how we should treat others with fairness and justice and generosity, no matter who they were or where they came from. He embraced those who were in need of healing, he challenged the rigid political and religious structures which imposed extraordinary burdens on people already taxed to their limits. He reminded us that God is a loving God:

- a God of compassion and mercy, slow to get angry and filled with unfalling love and faithfulness (Ps 86:15).

Jesus came to show us how to live and, in doing so, how ‘to have life to the full’, not in the after-life but now because living life in that way enriches and fulfills us now. Because of the courageous and radical way he lived his life, and his openness to others, he was a threat to the entrenched political, social and religious authorities of his day. So they executed him.

The power of the Cross lies in the fact that it can bring meaning and purpose to life, even in times of sadness, loneliness and despair. The Cross is a reminder that sometimes God is most present when God appears to be absent. There are times when things may happen in our lives that cause us to question God’s existence. There are other times, where we feel that, while we still believe we feel that God is simply not present in our lives. For over 50 years, for example, Mother Teresa’s spiritual life was characterised by an experience of the absence of God. In her letters she writes of “darkness”, “I have no faith”, “God is absent” but that is not so surprising if we consider that during her long life, Mother Teresa devoted herself to the poor, the dying, the abandoned, the unwanted. It is easy to believe, to feel God’s presence when all is well – it is a challenge when confronted with poverty, injustice and violence. Mother Theresa’s compassion came in part from her experience of not-knowing-God, and in feeling that she lived far from God, she felt close to those people she served because she, like them, knew the absence of God.

We may suffer such times too. But the Cross is a reminder that sometimes God is most present when God appears to be absent. Despite how we may feel, God can be very close – we struggle and grapple with why this happened, we question ‘how can God let this happen?’, ‘why did God do this?’, ‘I can no longer believe in God’ – yet in reality God is very much present in our ideas, our arguing, our exploring, our wondering, our sadness, our anger. Sometimes we are called to strive to encounter God beyond the comfortable images that we have been so used to, that may have sustained us. Perhaps we may have clung on to them for too long and now it is time to go deeper, to enter a more intimate relationship.

Jesus’ message was confronting. He did not speak in abstract images – he saw the reality of the poor person, the dispossessed person, the neglected person, the one who was sick or in pain, those in need of love. He embraced the leper, the unclean, he cleaned their wounds and in doing so, Jesus challenged the religious thinking of many. By word and action, Jesus preached a radically alternate vision; he spoke of a community characterised by inward transformation which is expressed in compassion for everyone, not external compliance to laws and rituals. The crucifixion is the ultimate expression of that vision. It is, first and foremost a further expression of his love; even at this time he forgives those who brought Him to this death, those who could not accept his challenge to their ways, to their rules, to their authority. He forgives those he is crucified with.

I read recently a Good Friday homily by the late Cardinal Martini. He offered three challenges – how in our daily lives do we embrace both holiness and compassion, instead of choosing one or the other? In Jesus’ day so many people were considered impure, untouchable as it were – ‘good’ people did not associate with them in fear that their holiness might be sullied. Such was not Jesus’ vision. ‘Who are you tempted to exclude as impure and unclean?’ he asked. Thirdly, he offered this thought: Consider: when God hates all the same people you hate, you can be sure that you’ve created God in your own image!

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