

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Feiday, April 7, 2023
Good Friday

The Celebration of the Lord's Passion
5:30 p.m.

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Elaine Farmer

on

Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22; John 13:1-17,31b-35; St John's Passion

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Touching the Mystery **A Sermon Series for Holy Week 2023** **Slaying the Ram of Human Pride**

Good Friday. The climax of Jesus' Passion and the bleeding heart of the story of God. A day of dark deeds and, in Jesus' crucifixion, a momentary triumph of the world's ways over God's. A momentary triumph. And the consequences of that triumph? Two thousand-odd years of the misuse of power, anti-semitism and villainous deeds done in the name of God. Human willfulness devoid of God's grace.

If this day is to have any meaning for us, if this Holy Week journey which we are taking together, is to bring new life to us, then we have to open ourselves to the worst of this day. On Palm Sunday, we faced the choice whether to confess our complicity in the events of the Passion, or not. Whether to face our responsibility for our involvement or turn our faces away. This is the day when the words Jesus directed to those who had come to arrest him ... are directed at us: *'this is your hour, and the power of darkness!'* It was Judas' hour, too, and he couldn't face Jesus' challenge of love, and the gift of his life — and Judas killed himself. Now, our moment has come.

Let me tell you a parable for this day of death, not from the Bible but from the world of human destruction, the world for which Jesus died, and God weeps. This parable resonates with the drumbeats of war and the gleeful shouts of human pride and speaks of the dark side of this day, the day called 'Good' because of the gift of life it offers a world steeped in blood, in death, and its own pride.

'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young' it's called. By Wilfred Owen, it was spawned in the grimness of World War One. Owen looked to the story of Abraham taking his son to sacrifice him to God and wrote:

... Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,

...

And stretchèd forth the knife to slay his son.
When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him. Behold,
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.

But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

The ram of human pride. It has butted its way into the doings of humankind throughout history and it's butted into us all this Holy Week. On Palm Sunday when we mingled with the crowd who gawked and stared as Jesus on his donkey entered Jerusalem. They waved palm branches over their heads, shouting Hosannas in their ancient way of greeting a leader but fickleness wins this day as they scream just as gleefully for his blood, flinging their palms to the ground. Yesterday, we climbed to that upper room where Jesus shared a final meal with his friends and disciples and we thought about when we have been like Judas turning away from the open hands of God. Betrayal. Or when we have been like Peter, willing to love, to follow Jesus, but weak and stumbling into his own betrayal of his friend. "I tell you, I do not know him!" "The fact of evil, the difficulty of virtue, the fickleness of [our] own hearts".² These three have trudged at our backs all week and they're not done with us yet.

As I've thought about this day during the past months, one story has refused to be ignored. It's invaded my dreams and resisted relentlessly when I've tried to silence it. It is Good Friday for me and I know I've told it here before but, forgive me, I must tell it again. It demands to be told, this story of sin, horrific sin, from my country, from nineteenth century Australia. A man in the bush, in the wide open outback wilderness, smelt the stench of death, and found:

... a little girl perhaps ten years old ... She stood with her back to a ... tree, her arms drawn backward from the shoulder-blades round the trunk, her hands tied behind it ... it was so hot she could not have lived more than a few days ... The thirst would be the worst ... [The stockman] who had tied her there had no rope, so he used a whip. And there she had stood— stood in the terror of a virginity regarded under native tribal law so much more strictly than that of white people; stood while the brute who had tied her there had forgotten her in other victims; stood while the ants and the flies had worked their will on her; stood while thirst, torture, and the crows found her.³

Golgotha. Dear God, there are so many Golgothas in this world and they have all been built by human hands, with intent, and deliberate cruelty! A little girl tied to a tree, condemned to die — slowly and in fear. Jesus' cross is often called 'the tree', for his arms outspread and nailed to its branches. "The tree with its roots in the mind's dark"⁴, for its birth in human evil. In his gospel, John says "*meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene*".⁵ Plain, matter-of-fact, unemotional language. In such contrast to the emotional assault of crucifixion. John's figures are like statues. Silent. John's account denies the women words but their silence thunders at us across the centuries! As her son's life dripped away at her feet, well might Jesus' mother have screamed, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken ME!*

'Am I a stone, and not a sheep,
That I can stand, O Christ, beneath Thy cross,
To number drop by drop Thy Blood's slow loss,
And yet not weep?'⁶

Thus might Mary have screamed before Jesus's cross. Thus might that Aboriginal mother have screamed before her little girl's execution tree. Two mothers some indigenous Australians would called 'damagyeena'. 'A mother who mourns for her dead child'.⁷ Those two women weep and with them weep all the mothers of history whose children have been slaughtered or stolen in the power games of the mighty. Victims of unbelievable savagery and indifference. The little boys killed by King Herod's men.⁸ The little girls stolen in Nigeria. Yazidi children in Iraq. Uyghur children in China. Children in Rwanda and Ukraine. Indigenous children in Canada and Australia, Native American children in this country. Their mothers' voices swell with the ancient wail from the scriptures: *A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel ... weeping for her children ... [refusing] to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.*⁹

Such sorrow. Such crimes. Too easily the world, in condemning Judas as guilty of Jesus' crucifixion, calling it the foulest crime of all time, has shifted condemnation onto the Jewish people, deeming them, for two

thousand-odd years, the cause of the world's horrors. This condemnation has given birth to anti-semitism, created ghettos and inquisitions, organised witch-burnings, launched crusades and plotted heartless killings of countless unknown souls deemed to be the enemies of God, apostate spurners of the Christ. In the *Inferno*, Dante called that part of his vision of hell to which he consigned Judas, Judecca, for ghettos in cities like Venice where Jews were forced to live, separated from Christians, permanently condemned as Christ-killers by the anti-semitism that has blighted history.¹⁰ One of the lessons of Good Friday is to face, again, the evil that has been done in the name of God against the Jewish people, and to be shamed. This is not a new thought, but it is a sad one, and one that needs to be repeated, today as much as ever — that passion and zeal can blot out reason, snuff out love, and fuel firestorms of hate.

So what about us? We, in the church? Are we not — like Judas — ‘insiders’? How redemptive is our loving? How ready are we to admit to dark spots on our souls and on the histories of our societies? Or do we too look for scapegoats of our own? Scapegoats like Judas? Do we allow the ram of human pride to bully us into leaving undone those things which we ought to do, and doing those things which we ought not to do?

Ahead of us is Holy Saturday, the dead day when God will be silent and we will feel alone and lonely. But, at this moment, we are still standing among the crowds at Golgotha. Jesus hangs on his cross. Is he dying for Judas? And what about forgiveness? We hear him gasp out, *‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’*¹¹ Does he forgive Judas? Will he forgive us? We’ve journeyed with him all week, but did we cry out for his freedom? Will we quietly drop our palm branches among the dry bones and the skulls of Golgotha and slink away after the crowd? Will he forgive us?

Silence has fallen now at Golgotha, and the crowd is hurrying away, eyes downcast, brows troubled. A ripple of fear and unease disturbs the air, as they begin to realise a terrible thing has been done. They remember shouting *‘crucify him!’*¹² and guilt stirs uneasily in their souls. Storm clouds dull the sun ...

Still falls the rain ...

Then sounds the voice of One who like the heart of man
Was once a child who among beasts has lain —
‘Still do I love, still shed my innocent light, my Blood, for thee.’¹³

And on the wind there is a whisper. *‘It is finished.’* Jesus is dead.

For us, now is the time for awe and wonder. ‘The fact of evil, the difficulty of virtue, the fickleness of [our] own hearts’¹⁴ — these troublesome three have pestered us all through this Holy Week. Tomorrow we must put paid to their battle for our hearts and think about forgiveness, about the Christ who loved to the death. Dying for Peter. Dying for Judas. Dying for us. Dying for the world. For now ...

Let evening come.
Let it come as it will, and don’t
be afraid. God does not leave us
comfortless, so let evening come.¹⁵

It is time for silence and to pray ...

“Holy God, Holy and Mighty, into your hands [we] commend our spirit[s].”¹⁶

¹ Luke 22:52-53

² A.N.Wilson, *The Vicar of Sorrows*, Penguin, 1994, pp.286-287.

³ Gilmore, Dame Mary. Story 'The Whip' in *More Recollections*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1935, pp.220-222.

⁴ R.S. Thomas, 'Amen'

⁵ John 19:25

⁶ Christina Rossetti, 'Good Friday'

⁷ This claimed by lexicographer David Astle on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) television breakfast show on 5 March 2019

⁸ Matthew 2:16

⁹ Jeremiah 31:15

¹⁰ <http://danteworlds.laits.utexas.edu/circle9.html#lucifer> Note this same idea is expressed by James Carroll in his article 'Gabriel's revelation' pub. in the *International Herald Tribune*, Friday 18 July, 2008. Carroll calls anti-semitism 'history's worst disease'.

¹¹ Luke 23:34

¹² John 19:15

¹³ Edith Sitwell, 'Still Falls the Rain'

¹⁴ A.N.Wilson, *The Vicar of Sorrows*, Penguin, 1994, pp.286-287.

¹⁵ Poem 'Let Evening Come' by Jane Kenyon

¹⁶ Based on Luke 23:46 and Psalm 31:5