

The Barton-upon-Humber group of parishes.

Good Friday 2020

The Good Friday Collect

Almighty Father,
look with mercy on this your family
for which our Lord Jesus Christ was content to be betrayed
and given up into the hands of sinners
and to suffer death upon the cross;
who is alive and glorified with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.

Readings for the Liturgy:

Isaiah 52.13 – 53.12, Psalm 22, Hebrews 4.14–16; 5.7–9; John 18.1 – 19.42

The Old Testament book of the prophet Isaiah has sometimes been called 'the fifth Gospel' because so many fundamental beliefs about Christ are reflected in it, particularly in the so-called 'servant songs' of the middle chapters. No-one acquainted with the Good Friday story can fail to note the resonances today's reading and the events in John's Passion story. How much the Isaiah passages influence the Gospel writers is an ongoing discussion, but the earliest Christians, before the New Testament formed, thought the servant songs significant. So too Psalm 22, with its chilling parallels to the crucifixion, especially the haunting first line, '*My God, why have you forsaken me?*'

Hebrews, though clearly influenced by Isaiah, offers another OT take on the crucifixion, and uses the language of the Temple and its priesthood to explore the mystery of salvation. Jesus is the one who holds together the human and the divine, who knows what it is to be us, and who brings us with him to the Godhead. Christ is the one who builds a bridge home for humanity. John, takes the Passion story of the other Gospels and weaves something from it to reveal what is going on 'behind the scenes'. This is the place of Jesus' enthronement: Justin the Martyr (d165) complains that Psalm 96 has been 'edited' to remove a reference to God *reigning* from the cross and it's significant that, once Christians start to make art, the crucified Christ is always represented as a monarch., never a victim. Lengthy dwelling on the sufferings of Christ comes many centuries later. As the sixth-century hymn-writer Venantius Fortunatus wrote:

*Fulfilled is now what David told in true prophetic song of old,
how God the nations' King should be; for God is reigning from the tree.*

The following poems are separated by more than a thousand years. One is known to have existed before 800 AD, for its first lines are carved on the 8th century Ruthwell Cross in Dumfriesshire. The full text survives in a book of Old English poetry in Vercelli in Italy. In this extract the Tree of the Cross is speaking:

The Dream of the Rood

“It happened long ago—I remember it still—

I was hewn down at the holt’s end
stirred from my stock. Strong foes seized me there,
worked in me an awful spectacle, ordered me to heave up their criminals.

Those warriors bore me on their shoulders
until they set me down upon a mountain.

Enemies enough fastened me there.

I saw then the Lord of Mankind
hasten with much courage, willing to mount up upon me.

“There I dared not go beyond the Lord’s word
to bow or burst apart—then I saw the corners of the earth
tremor—I could have felled all those foemen,
nevertheless I stood fast.

“The young warrior stripped himself then—that was God Almighty—
strong and firm of purpose—he climbed up onto the high gallows,
magnificent in the sight of many. Then he wished to redeem mankind.

I quaked when the warrior embraced me—
yet I dared not bow to the ground, collapse
to earthly regions, but I had to stand there firm.

The rood was reared. I heaved the mighty king,
the Lord of Heaven—I dared not topple or reel.

“They skewered me with dark nails, wounds easily seen upon me,
treacherous strokes yawning open. I dared injure none of them.
They shamed us both together. I was besplattered with blood,
sluicing out from the man’s side, after launching forth his soul.

“Many vicious deeds have I endured on that hill—

I saw the God of Hosts racked in agony.
Darkness had covered over with clouds
the corpse of the Sovereign, shadows oppressed
the brightest splendour, black under breakers.
All of creation wept, mourning the king’s fall—
Christ was upon the cross.

Although the poem draws heavily on imagery drawn from battle and war-band, the thinking behind it is not so very remote from that of the Good Shepherd, the one who lays down his life for the sheep. In both, the Christ-figure is devoted to the care of those given to him, be it a flock or a community. The image is that of the hero going out to do single combat with the foe and whose victory will make his people safe. Christ is the Champion of humanity, challenging The Enemy.

The wrathful God is notably absent, as we'd expect, from this early meditation on the Cross. Nor does the writer try to explain how it all 'works'. Instead he uses drama to fire the Christian imagination and, in the setting of early England, inspires the hearer to be loyal to their heavenly King and champion. In doing so he leaves questions for us to puzzle over.

Simply put, if Christ is our champion, who is the Enemy he sets out to defeat? What are the powers of unlife, the things which deny life and wholeness to the world? Are they within us, or beyond us, or something else. From what – or who – are we being set free. From what does Christ save us? Or, as Paul put it, if God is for us, who is against us?

Morning glory, starlit sky

Bill Vanstone (1923-1999) wrote this poem to end his book 'Love's endeavour, love's expense,' one of the classics of late 20th century spirituality. He reintroduces one of the great themes of early Christian thinking about God, that in Christ God 'empties himself' (Philippians 2) on our behalf. The whole of God's creative and redeeming work is one great outpouring of self-giving.

In creation, God calls into being something which can respond to him – or turn away from him. It is an act of self-giving and of self-risk which makes God vulnerable to what we throw at him. The God of Calvary is one who sets aside his privileges and rights to be with us, far removed from the remote controller of the sky which so many have imagined God to be.

Morning glory, starlit sky,
soaring music, scholar's truth,
flight of swallows, autumn leaves
memory's treasure, grace of youth:

open, Lord, are these Thy gifts,
gifts of love to mind and sense;
hidden is love's agony,
love's endeavour, love's expense.

Love that gives, gives ever more,
gives with zeal, with eager hands,
spares not, keeps not, all outpours,
ventures all, its all expends.

Drained is love in making full,
bound in setting others free,
poor in making many rich,
weak in giving power to be.

Therefore He Who Thee reveals
hangs, O Father, on that Tree
helpless; and the nails and thorns
tell of what Thy love must be.

Thou art God: no monarch Thou
throned in easy state to reign;
Thou art God, Whose arms of love
aching, spent, the world sustain.

We who have been brought up to address God as 'Almighty' may find Vanstone's poem disturbing. How can God be helpless and subject to what we do to him? How can we describe God as 'weak' or 'drained' or 'bound'? And yet the God who self-sacrifices for the good of the beloved perhaps strikes a chord in our own experience even of our flawed, human relationships.

The striking line, 'Thou art God, Whose arms of love aching, spent, the world sustain' find an echo in the Eucharistic prayers of many denominations – 'He opened wide his arms for us on the Cross' – being themselves derived from one of the most ancient Eucharistic prayers to survive.

Is there anything in Vanstone's thought which rings true, either in our own stories or in our encounters with God? Is self-giving love genuinely weak, or is it the great gift which only the strong can make? Do these words give us another take on the Good Friday story, one which speaks less of our offences and weaknesses and more of the God who called us into being in the first place? Does it free us from our worst fears? And what were those fears?

Other places to look

Where logic-chopping breaks down, poetry/Hymns can take us further. Hymns like 'My song is love unknown' or 'When I survey' all offer ways in to the Good Friday mystery. There's more to explore than 'There is a Green Hill...'