

Good Friday Thought 10 April 2020

That extended reading we heard from the prophecy of Isaiah could have been written for such a time as this. The strange picture of the suffering servant as some kind of plague victim and pariah; who now appears in our minds' eye as the personification of humanity afflicted by the dreadful new disease Covid-19.

“so marred was his appearance...a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity...stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted...he was cut off from the land of the living.”

If Isaiah speaks into our present crisis with sober, gloomy truth, let us also allow ourselves that thrill (shared by the early Christians and ever down the ages) of how he spoke directly into the events of Jesus' passion and death. This enlivens our minds and confirms our faith: ancient Israelite prophecy fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah; God mysteriously working out His purposes in new ways. But it also strengthens our hearts to know we are not alone:

“Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases.”

As we seek to walk with Jesus this Holy Week, we know profoundly that He really does walk with us and share in our personal and collective suffering; because it is His too; he has made suffering, disease, coronavirus His own; He has made us His own.

Today, Good Friday, is the most solemn day of the Christian Year; and this year it has every reason to be just that. Yet it is called “Good” Friday; it speaks of God's goodness, mercy and marking out of new ways.

We heard part of John's Passion a few weeks ago on Mothering Sunday, the encounter between Jesus, his mother Mary and John the beloved disciple. From the cross, Jesus creates a new thing, a new and different kind of family or community; one which perhaps we can identify with now more than ever. Our regular set-up at home and in church has been put on hold and we have had to find new ways of being family, friends and also church. As it was God's gift on the cross to found a new family beginning with Mary and John, so it is His gift at this time to make us a family, a church; bound together by His love, goodness and creativity even in these difficult, dispersed days.

I have often been struck by Jesus' final words in John's Gospel. They could so easily have been, “I am finished.” Very naturally and very sadly, this is often the cry of men, women and children in the sorrows of the world and at this time. But it wasn't Jesus' cry. He said, “It is finished.” That is to say, it is completed, consummated, accomplished; my work is done.

On that first Good Friday, He won for us the victory; apparent defeats in the meantime are only apparent and temporary. God's love in Jesus is total, real and eternal.

On Palm Sunday, we heard from Her Majesty the Queen (mother of our nation):

“We should take comfort that while we may have more still to endure, better days will return: we will be with our friends again; we will be with our families again; we will meet again.”

And once more from Isaiah:

“Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.”

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