

Sermon for Easter Day - 4th April 2010

Good Friday, like any Friday, was the Day of Preparation: the day on which Jews made everything ready for the Sabbath meal. But according to John's account, that Sabbath day was 'a high day', an especially holy day since it coincided with the Passover itself. John's Gospel thus makes a particularly emphatic link between the death of Jesus and the formative experience of the Hebrew people, bound together by their common experience of slavery and liberation.

For years the ancient Israelites, who had migrated to Egypt and settled among the Egyptians generation before, in a time of famine, had been treated by their host nation as less than human. Forced into manual labour and maltreated, they must have built up a strong resentment against the ruler and his agents who beat them, demanded the impossible from them yet would not give them the option of emigrating back where their ancestors had come from.

Yet one day a leader who sprang from nowhere, claiming to speak in the name of the ancestral God they had almost forgotten, challenged Pharaoh on their behalf and led them on the start of a great westward trek. The opportunity for them to make a start was given by a great disaster which befell the Egyptians, a tragedy that has come down to us as the death of the first-born sons. And in that disaster the Israelites saw the hand of God. Their tradition spoke of a sacrifice, a slain lamb whose blood would mark out Israelite houses from Egyptian, an identifying signal for God to leave the Israelites unharmed, to 'pass over' their houses while visiting calamity on the next.

In this story as in the one that follows it, which tells of the drowning of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea, it is not difficult to see a certain *Schadenfreude*, a certain grim satisfaction on the narrator's part, at the tyrant and persecutors finally getting their come-uppance. Being human we recognise this reaction as understandable, even proper. Hebrew tradition, as the Psalms also show us, had no reluctance to see the wicked punished, the tables turned; it was happy for the oppressed, in the language of the Victims' Rights movement that has come to this country from the United States, to 'get closure'.

Yet it is precisely at this point that the parallels often drawn between the Passover, the Crossing of the Red Sea, and the death and rising of Jesus break down. For the death of Jesus led to no punishment of anybody at the hand of God. Judas, overwhelmed with remorse, hanged *himself*; he was not struck down by a divine hand. The Roman Empire whose representatives pronounced and executed the death sentence went on to its greatest flourishing after the Crucifixion and became the vehicle for a dramatic spread of the Christian message. We see in the later appalling treatment of the Jewish people, whose spokesmen called for Jesus' death, no God-given punishment

for killing the Messiah but merely an example of human inhumanity and prejudice. And in the Gospel story itself we hear Jesus pray for the very soldiers who are knocking nails into his flesh.

The life and the words of Jesus speak to us of unconditional love. Humanity was God's creation; what was needed was a pointer to the way out of its fallen and selfish state. In Jesus that pointer was given. The true counterpart of Jesus in the passover story is not the Hebrew liberated at the cost of Egyptian casualties, but the unresisting lamb. The blood of the lamb on the Israelite doorposts stands, for us, for the mark that Jesus left on the human race, the promise that is now ours of forgiveness, liberation and life.

Yes, life: for the Easter story tells us that although Jesus paid a terrible price for his love, the end result was triumph. He *does* live happily ever after. From the women's first baffling experience of an empty tomb grew the unshakeable conviction of Jesus' followers that he was alive and with them, that defeat and death were not the end of the story. The all-powerful Creator had not shown his power in a forcible turning-round of human nature, nor in a drastic punishment for human failings; for the one would have been incompatible with our free will, the other inconsistent with the unconditional nature of God's love. But now the time *had* come to show his omnipotence. It was, and is, unthinkable that evil and death should finally prevail. Jesus' challenges to the religious establishment, his journey to Jerusalem and his unresisting acceptance of his fate all struck observers as quite incredible stupidity: tactics that could really only end as they did, on the execution ground at Golgotha. But in raising Jesus, God has vindicated Jesus' way: the foolish tactic has been shown to be right after all.

I believe, therefore, that the Easter message is one of hope. For the ancient Egyptian and the modern persecutor; for the innocent victim and for all of us with our limited vision, partial understanding and frequent mistakes, God in Jesus offers both his own unconditional love and an example for us to follow in dealings amongst ourselves. Suffering does not yet have an end: it is precisely in this suffering world that the example of Jesus can be followed, for it was in the midst of suffering that that example was shown. But the joy of the Easter morning also began in the dark.

What we say to our suffering neighbour will not always be in terms of the supernatural, for that is not a message everyone can always hear. To speak of lessons to be learned, of the good that comes as a reaction to evil, even of the suffering God who stands alongside us, are all to tell only part of the truth. We must judge which parts of the truth to emphasise at any particular time. But as Christians we can none the less be confident, no matter what befalls, that in God's good time the way of Jesus will lead to life: a life already shared with us here, but ultimately a life without tears, together in God's nearer presence and seeing him face to face.