

All Saints Alive

Human failures – God's love

Archbishop Rowan Williams' Easter Day Sermon

It was two and a half years ago; we had just finished a substantial open-air meal after a Eucharist on the football field in the tiny island of Malaita in the Solomons. The Premier of Malaita had been talking about the bloody civil war that had divided the islands until just a year earlier; and then he said, 'I want you to bless us; I need to say in public that we were responsible as well as the people on the other islands. So I'm going to ask the crowd to be quiet, and then I'll kneel down and ask you to pronounce God's forgiveness for whatever we contributed to the horrors of these last years.'

Sometimes you know that you have heard the reality of the gospel as you've never heard it before. Here was a politician, representing a community that had suffered greatly and inflicted great suffering as well, simply saying, 'We were all wrong. We all needed healing and forgiveness. The problem isn't them but us – all of us, or us and them.' And it was as if for the first time you could see the bare bones of what reconciliation means.

There is a huge step from looking back over past history and telling only your story and looking back to find out what other stories there are and giving them room to be heard also. I don't know whether Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams, a few weeks back, were beginning to take that step, but at least they helped to make it possible for others. There have been two stories in Northern Ireland for such a long time, two incompatible stories – Catholics telling the story of heartless British imperialism, systematic discrimination and economic injustice, corrupt law enforcers; Protestants telling the story of heartless terrorism, religious authoritarianism, priests who secretly promote violence. And then there comes a moment when the possibility is just dimly discerned that neither of these perceptions is an objective record; that everyone in this history made decisions, some shockingly evil, some tragic, some foolish – and that those decisions and the sufferings that came from them don't have the power to tell you what decisions you have to make today.

Our natural human default setting, when we're stuck in conflict, seems to be to ask those around to agree with us that our story is the right one, and that no amount of suffering or tragedy on the other side can compare with ours. And if you suggest that they might need listening to as well, you are regarded as in effect justifying the terrible things they have done. We do it in our individual relationships, as all of us here will know. And we do it, compulsively and destructively, in the relationships between nations and cultures, demanding that the world recognise our exclusive claim to innocence.

Now there are relationships in which the imbalance is enormous – we've recently been recalling one such in the shape of the grim history of slavery. There are hideously abusive relationships between individuals, marriages scarred with horrific violence for example, or the abuse of children. No sane person will pretend that everyone is equally to blame.

But the point is that the situation is not changed by someone being declared completely innocent and someone else completely guilty. What changes things is seeing that the horror of violence against a child or against an enslaved race is dreadful not just because the victim is innocent but because the victim is human and helpless. The shared story is not a cartoonishly simple tale of absolute embodied evil and absolute embodied innocence, but as a human story of pain, error, violence and sin, a vortex into which people have been drawn, innocently or not so innocently. And in relationships between persons or groups more or less equal and grown-up, going forward requires us all to learn a measure of openness to discovering things about ourselves we did not know, seeing ourselves through the eyes of another. What they see may be fair or unfair, but it is a reality that has been driving someone's reactions and decisions. We'd better listen, hateful and humiliating though it may be for some of us.

Now what the events of Good Friday and Easter tell us is that every single human being is implicated in something profoundly wrong. We

say, rather glibly, that Jesus died for our sins, that he died to save humankind – and thereby we say that we are all in need of something we cannot find or manufacture for ourselves, in need of a word, a gift, a touch from someone else, somewhere else, so that we can be made free of whatever it is that keeps us in the clutch of illusions and failures. If the purpose of Jesus dying was that all might be made whole, the implication is that all have been sick. So that Good Friday tells all of us, those who think they're good and those who know they're bad, all alike, to look inside and ask what part we would have played in the drama of the Lord's death. There is only one innocent character in that drama and it isn't me or you. So for all of us there is something in our lives that would, if it came to it, if it reigned unchecked in us, allow us to range ourselves with the crucifiers – some habit of selfishness or fear, some prejudice, some guilt that we don't want confronted, some deficit in love or lovability. In some way, however small, we have already contributed to the death of Jesus. He is there on the cross because we are the way we are.

But on Easter Day, this bleak recognition is turned on its head. We were all involved; yet the combined weight of every human failure and wrongness, however small or great, all of that could not extinguish the creative love of God. We share one human story in which we are all caught up in one sad tangle of selfishness and fear and so on. But God has entered that human story; he has lived a life of divine and unconditional love in a human life of flesh and blood. He has not protected himself, or forced anyone to accept him. And in this world that human beings have made for themselves, this world of politics and religion and social co-operation, divine love loses. It is helpless to maintain itself in the face of the so-called real world. The vortex of error and failure that affects everybody in the world draws Jesus into its darkness and seems to destroy him body and soul. That, says Good Friday, is the kind of world this is, and we are all part of it.

Yet there is more than the world to think about. If that love is really what it claims to be, eternal and unconditional, it will not be destroyed. What's more, the human embodiment of that love, the flesh and blood of Jesus, cannot be destroyed. As we heard in the reading from Acts this morning, the friends of Jesus ate and drank with him after he was raised from the dead – as we are doing in this Holy Communion. The life that God brought into the world in Jesus is here for ever with us.

So: if we can accept the unwelcome picture of us and our world that Good Friday offers, we are, in the strangest way, set free to hear what Easter

says. Give up the struggle to be innocent and the hope that God will proclaim that you were right and everyone else wrong. Simply ask for whatever healing it is that you need, whatever grace and hope you need to be free, then step towards your neighbour; Easter reveals a God who is ready to give you that grace and to walk with you. In St Paul's bold words in his Letter to the Romans (11.32), 'In making all mankind prisoners to disobedience, God's purpose was to show mercy to all mankind.'

When in our world we are faced with the terrible deadlocks of mutual hatred and suspicion, with rival stories of suffering and atrocity, we have to pray for this resurrection message to be heard. In the Middle East, in Northern Ireland and the Balkans and Sri Lanka, in the tribal conflicts of Africa, in the suspicions between Muslims who associate all Christians with the Crusaders and Christians who associate all Muslims with terrorism, in our most tangled and unhappy personal relations, and yes, in the bitter conflicts in the Church too – can we take in what Good Friday and Easter Day have to say to us? That we are all trapped, and we shall only come out of the traps we have made for ourselves when we grasp that God is greater than we are and is determined to go on living his life among us whatever happens? If so, we are free, like that extraordinary politician on Malaita, to face the past with courage and realism and to begin the risky journey towards true reconciliation.

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...it's a security camera. I got the idea from a Salford traffic warden....