

The Holy Spirit Province NEWSLETTER

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GOD'S LOVE IN JESUS CHRIST: 4th SUNDAY OF LENT B

Are you and I being saved? If so, how?

When I was going to Catholic primary school a long time ago, Christian teaching was taught by the question-and-answer method. One question the catechism asked was this: 'Why do we call Good Friday "good"?' It answered in these words: 'We call that day "good", on which Jesus Christ died, because his death has shown how much he loves us, and has brought us so many blessings.' The answer endorses the famous and treasured saying in the gospel of John today: 'God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life' (3:16) So St Paul of the Cross, Founder of the Passionists, has called the Passion and Death of Jesus, 'the greatest and most overwhelming work of God's love'.

But in telling and re-telling the story of what Jesus did and what happened to him, not everyone has highlighted God's love. Take the stirring hymn, 'How Great Thou Art', which ranks in the top five of nearly every survey of most-loved hymns in the English-speaking world! (It rocketed to fame in Billy Graham's 1954 London Crusade). I can comfortably join in the singing about wandering through the forests, looking down from lofty mountain grandeur, feeling the gentle breeze, and praising the greatness of their Creator. I can join in the fourth verse about looking forward to the joy of that day, when Jesus will come to take me home to God. But when it comes to the third verse, I have to stop singing the words, because they seem to suggest that Jesus died as a substitute sacrifice for my sins!

'And when I think that God his Son not sparing
Sent him to die, I scarce can take it in.
That on the Cross my burden gladly bearing
He bled and died to take away my sin.'

No! God the Father did not send his Son into the world to die on the cross. Only a monster God would do such a thing. The Father sent his Son to live and love - to show and tell everyone, just how real and deep, how everlasting and unchanging, is God's love for all human beings, bar none.

On the part of Jesus, his response to God was to be faithful to his mission from God - to make God's kingdom of truth, love, healing, peace, and joy, happen everywhere on earth. No matter what happened to him, Jesus would not take back his commitment to that mission. But the response of his enemies was to reject God and kill Jesus. So, it was not God who created the cross, but human

beings. Human malice, scorn, and hatred put Jesus on the cross. So, the cross is, first of all, a symbol of human sinfulness. In the second place, it is also a symbol of continuing divine love and fidelity. In fact, 'God the Father both inspired Jesus with courage and love and waited on his free decision to suffer for mankind' (Gerald O'Collins, echoing Thomas Aquinas).

The response of God the Father to the rejection of Jesus by human beings, and to the fidelity of God's Son, was to raise him from the dead. So, God remained loving and faithful, despite human infidelity and hostility. Indeed, in raising Jesus to life and glory, 'God transforms the brutal and wicked act of crucifixion into an event that brings healing and liberation' (Denis Edwards) to all who connect to the cross.

It would be a big mistake to isolate the death of Jesus from his life and ministry before it. It must be seen as the climax of the way he lived, the result of all he did and endured for the coming of the kingdom of God. The evidence of the bible suggests that Jesus was expecting both a premature and violent death, the lot of the prophets before him. It even seems that he adopted a kind of 'bring it on' attitude when he drove out the buyers and sellers from the Temple. But, as he saw it, what awaited him was not disaster but destiny. He accepted his cruel and unjust death, trusting that not only was it necessary for the kingdom of God to happen, but that his beloved Father (his Abba), would vindicate him, and do so personally. His trust, of course, was richly rewarded, rewarded when he rose in his body from the grave.

Salvation in Jesus may lead us to reflect with Christopher Monaghan CP:

'God loves us with a love that is so deep that we cannot even begin to plumb its depths... In John's gospel, Jesus is lifted up to lead us home, not to judge or condemn, but to give us life. We all need beacons in the dark that point us in the right direction, and Jesus lifted up on the cross is that beacon that will bring us safely home.'

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