**Good Friday Year A 2020**

Throughout the history of the church there has been the familiar Good Friday narrative. I’m not talking about the reading of the Passion. That speaks for itself. I’m speaking of the theological narrative; not the only theological narrative in the lore of the church, but the dominant one nonetheless, a narrative embraced over the centuries by the likes of Augustine of Hippo, and Thomas Aquinas, and John Calvin, and Karl Barth, venerable voices all. The narrative goes something like this: Because in the beginning humankind fell from grace, and ever since that fall, the race of humankind has lived in depravity… so caught up in sin, that setting things right required God sending his son to be killed; that an atoning sacrifice was needed to pay the price for all the sins ever committed… that in the cosmic scheme of things, God required a so-called perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world… and that the salvation of the world took place at a specific time and place just outside the city walls of Jerusalem in 33 A.D…. Jesus the sacrifice on the altar before a God demanding appeasement.

There is no doubt that the martyrdom of the innocent evokes the life force, evokes a life response…. After Jesus’ martyrdom, the faith exploded exponentially throughout the Mediterranean Basin… To stand for the Truth at the risk of one’s life calls forth the best in us; but to frame the crucifixion of Jesus as the moment in time when God redeemed the world… a moment in time that we memorialize on crucifixes in churches all over Christendom… That, I think, misses the mark, and in some ways is pathological… and a reason, among a number of reasons that that is a problem, is that such a theology projects our redemption, the world’s redemption, back into the past, far removed from our experience, and allows us to abdicate our own participation, our own responsibility in God’s ongoing project of salvation.

This theology became all the more dominant during the Enlightenment, the time when the individual was lionized… Hegel called it the ‘rise of the autonomous self’… Some called it the humanist movement, and a lot of good came from it: liberated thinking, a renaissance in the sciences and economic theory. The human mind was lauded as God-like. But with the new found reverence for the individual, the definition of sin changed as well… Sin became the things we do against God as individuals, perhaps a form of self-loathing in the midst of the anxiety of the rapidly emerging modern world… We see the same self-loathing in our own rapidly changing time.

In the very early church, in the time of the writing of the gospels, sin was considered structural, that is, sin was understood as a collective brokenness within society, the culture at large… sin had to do with the abuse of power embedded in the rigid social order, and the resulting loss of dignity for the least powerful… Sin had to do with power disproportionately acquired by the few… It is sin that creates in society the concept of class and status… It is sin that wages war… it is sin that coined the phrase, “might makes right.” It is sin that deems self-interest a social good. It is sin that engenders poverty and violence and shame and indignity… Sin is less often overt… It is much more effective hiding within the status quo. But it was not that the system was broken, and Jesus and his followers aimed to fix it. Far from it. The system was commandeered by the powerful to serve their own self-interest. The system was far from broken; it operated with a dark efficiency. The scribes of the ancient world understood this, and called for resistance.

The liberation theologians of the mid and late 20th century proclaimed a new, not new, but a renewed awareness regarding Jesus’ passion and death; they called it “the scandal of the cross.” For them the cross was a symbol of man’s inhumanity to man… a symbol of dispossession, violence and perhaps most of all, shame…. For them the cross demanded resistance, liberation, and release, and justice. The cross was an obscenity. Indeed crucifixion in Jesus’ day was punishment for the traitor… It was brutal torture, and a brutal death to serve as an example, a deterrent to anyone who would dare question power and its designs… Crucifixion took place outside the walls of the city, which was explicitly meant to shame… Bodies were allowed to decompose on the cross to serve as an improper burial… the ultimate indignity.

So the cross, at least for Luke, Mark, and Matthew is a symbol of the sin of the world… that which Jesus in his life and ministry, and the movement he engendered, stood against…. There is, in short, nothing good about the cross; and yet it stands in our churches, leads our processions, hangs around our necks.

So why do we revere this day… this ’Good’ Friday? …Because it is a day of paradox, irony, ambiguity… the way life really is; a reality check, if you will; and we hold it up as sacred, and humming with mystery… The writers of John’s Gospel name the irony perhaps better than the Synoptic writers. John refers to the crucifixion as Jesus being lifted up. In his visionary mind he sees life germinating in this scandal of scandals… just as Moses, millennia before, as legend had it, lifted up the poisonous serpent in the desert as a sign of healing… Jesus’ death a lifting up…. Dante said that the way up is the way down… Wallace Stevens said Death is the mother of beauty… paradox upon paradox… In our lives of faith we speak of the restorative and creative power of Love, a life of purpose and meaning and joy… while at the same time we speak of the scandalous cross, an instrument of torture and death. It is between these two realities that life’s music is played.

So the question I want to pose to you this day is this… What kind of God would employ violence… murder, no less, to achieve the ends of salvation? Not ours. Here’s what I think the gospel writers, and Paul in his letters are saying: That to take up the cross is to take on, to embrace solidarity with all the victims of our world… That if the death of Jesus is to take away the sins of the world… it is because of his solidarity to the cause of freedom and dignity and justice that stands against the victimization of the least among us, God’s family, our family…. That is sin’s calling card: Power abusing the powerless… And, taking up the cross means that it is worth giving one’s life for the good of the other, that our sole purpose as the baptized is to stand against the evil of our world that wields violence and shame…. The cross for us brothers and sisters is that which we stand against… the evil of the world that we must confront… the dark of our world to which we must bear light…. We are, in Christ, the salvation for the victimized of our world. To take up the cross is to Love the crushed, the crucified among us.

So today is the day we stand in solidarity with Jesus of Nazareth… He who stood and stands for the innocent victims…. victims through no fault of their own, the innocent victims who suffer shame and violence simply because their humanity has been denied them by a system whose infrastructure is framed by sin; they are left outside the city walls, if you will…. To embrace the cross is to embrace our brothers and sisters who suffer unjustly… who are poor unjustly… who are hungry unjustly… who live in shame unjustly…. Who are subject to violence unjustly. In our own time, the system isn’t broken. The system has become an efficient means to horde power by an elite few, at the expense and to the detriment and disenfranchisement of the least of our brothers and sisters.

So despite its scandal…. no, because of it, we gather at the cross to confront the sin of the world… And we keep it here in our midst to remind us of Jesus’ passion for his world; and to remind us of the crucified still, and the crucified yet to be. We come to the cross as God comes to the cross to pay the price for the sin of the world… Jesus gave his life in solidarity for the sin of the world… that is why in the scandalous paradox of our faith we can dare… dare to call this Friday ‘Good.’