

WHAT'S "GOOD" ABOUT GOOD FRIDAY?

Good Friday

25th March 2016

John 18:1-19:30



Standing adjacent to the Colosseum and just to the southeast of the Roman Forum on what is known as the Summa Sacra Via or Sacred Way is the famous Arch of Titus. It was constructed in the year 82 of the Christian Era by the Emperor Domitian shortly after the death of his older brother, Titus, to commemorate Titus' victories that included the Siege of Jerusalem some twelve years earlier. Here, the Roman army levelled the city, plundered the magnificent temple and basically wiped out the Jewish state until modern times.

The Arch of Titus has provided the general model for many triumphal arches erected since then and they include the Arch of Constantine between the Colosseum and the Palatine Hill in Rome, the Washington Square Arch in Greenwich Village, New York, India Gate in New Delhi and perhaps the most famous arch of all the Arce de Triomphe in Paris.

Military triumphs were enthusiastically celebrated in Ancient Rome in a spectacle that saw the military commander process through the city in a four horse chariot resplendent in a crown of laurel and an all-purple, gold embroidered toga. The spoils of battle would be carried forth – captured weapons, artworks, sculptures and the like. Then the captured enemies themselves would pass by – kings and generals all shamed and humiliated by their defeat. Finally, the victorious army itself would march by with troops singing out loud their songs of conquest and subjugation.

Triumph was inscribed into the very psyche of the ancient Romans and this is evident in their architecture, their theatres, their temples, their sarcophaguses and their tombs. Conquest and victory penetrated their epics, their poetry and their drama.

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And this was epitomised in Rome's worship of the gods as the triumphal procession made its way ultimately to the temple of Jupiter, the mighty king of all the gods whose weapon was the thunderbolt. Jupiter was the god of the sky, the lightning and the thunderstorm. Jupiter was the god of Roman law and order, governance and strength.

And this was all about reputation and honour. This was about valour, gallantry and prowess. Strength and brute force, glory, status and prestige were the measure, the yardstick, indeed these things were the values and the priorities that most people coveted. Rome was all about power, dominance and might!

This morning we bear witness to a very different spectacle. If anything, the scene is a complete mockery of what the average Roman citizen would ascribe to. Here, Jesus is betrayed. Jesus is dragged before the authorities and put on trial, Jesus is mocked, beaten, tortured. Jesus is forced to carry his instrument of execution as he stumbles his way through the city streets before a jeering crowd.

Jesus is nailed to a cross where he experiences the most gross, humiliating death one could imagine. For, here Jesus is crucified. Jesus dies a very public death, Jesus dies the death of a common criminal on a rough, barren skull-shaped hill near a rubbish tip on the outskirts of Jerusalem.

Friends, what we acknowledge today is the very antithesis of what Rome promulgated. It is the very opposite to what Rome valued and prized. Here we encounter, not a god whose weapon is the thunderbolt and whose abode is a splendid edifice in the most powerful city on earth.

Rather, who and what we encounter this morning is a God who renders God-self weak and powerless. We encounter a God who is subject to the curse of humiliation and shame, a God who, in the eyes of the world, is nothing short of being foolish and even a little crazy.

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But, you see, the one who we encounter today, the one who is crucified on that barren, foreboding hill outside Jerusalem is the one that we follow. The one who dies an agonising, humiliating death in the shadow of that bleak Friday noon is the one who points to, and is of, the God we worship.

Now this may seem a little odd. Perhaps it may even seem a little insane. But the central affirmation of Christian faith bears witness to the God who chooses what is weak. The key focus of what it means to be Christian involves the God who embraces powerlessness.

And this is disclosed, this is declared to us on Good Friday. On this day, God becomes what we consider to be weak and powerless. And God does this to offer a different way, an alternative direction to the glory, the might and the prestige of Rome.

Indeed God does this to bring down those things that coerce, exploit and oppress. God does this to overcome those things that conquer, plunder and subjugate. God does as means to defeat the notion that might is right, that one person is better than another, that empire, domination and repression are the norm.

The great St Paul could see this. In Paul's ministry the apostle bears witness to Christ's crucifixion as being the supreme demonstration of how, through weakness and powerlessness, God defeats evil and God offers a new way where justice, peace and an unconditional commitment to others is the rule.

Here Paul does this in his correspondence with the church in Corinth as the apostle declares: *"God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong."* (1. Corinthians 1:27)



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In other words, the God we worship acts, not from a standpoint of coercion and strength, but from the position of unconditional love and of self-giving service. The God who we believe in reaches out to us, not from the posture of command and domination, but from the perspective of grace that is utterly generous and from mercy that is without limit.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the famous German martyr, speaks profoundly here when he offers us a further important insight with these words: *“God lets himself be pushed out of the world onto the cross. God is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which God is with us and helps us.”*

Bonhoeffer goes on to say, (and I paraphrase him here): *“The Gospel makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of God’s unlimited power, but by virtue of God’s weakness and suffering.”*

You see, on this Good Friday we learn a great deal about God and the way God works. For, this is a God who has no part in the glorious Roman triumph. This is a God who does not seek conquest and glory.

Rather, as Bonhoeffer clearly states, this surrendering of power by God, this relinquishing of might by our Creator takes place because God simply longs to be one with us. In other words, God doesn’t have an agenda akin to the mighty generals of Rome and their glorious gods. Rather God reaches out to simply be there with each one of us in the midst of our quite ordinary and often dysfunctional, unsettling lives!

Often we see the crucifixion of Christ as a something Jesus does for us. We look upon Jesus humbling himself on our behalf. We understand Jesus offering his life as a substitute. We claim Jesus dies on the cross in our place. It is as if we are never humbled, we are never shamed, we never feel weak or powerless ourselves. It feels as if we are somehow living in a vacuum, we are insulated from all this and we never suffer!

But in becoming weak and powerless, in choosing the shame and the humiliation of the cross, God actually chooses to become one with us. God identifies with us. In a commitment of friendship and solidarity, God takes on our suffering, God takes on our doubt, God enters into our weakness. In an act of kinship and companionship, God bears our pain.

And this expression of solidarity, this expression of one-ness or *“one-ing”* as the medieval mystic, Julian of Norwich puts it, becomes a demonstration of intimacy and love as God takes on our predicament, as God identifies with our situation - and as God becomes one with us.



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Friends, in becoming weak and powerless, in suffering the shame and humiliation of the cross Christ does not suffer “for” us, rather, Christ suffers “with” us. If Christ suffers “for” us there is a separation, there is a distance. But the declaration - Christ suffers “with” us points to a relationship, an accompaniment or a journeying together where God is indeed one with us!

Brothers and sisters in Christ, the God who chooses to be weak and powerless is, therefore, Good News for us. And it means there is actually something quite “good” about “Good Friday”!

For in choosing to be weak and powerless, a new way, a new direction is offered where might gives way to mercy, where domination submits to love and where glory and success acquiesces to grace and humble service.

And we know this is the way forward. Just look at the decline of Rome and the decay of empire over the centuries. Indeed our own experience of life tells us brute force and might have their limits. The quest for status and prestige has its use-by dates. Opulence and the pursuit of power ultimately consume us. Indeed, we would be fools to think otherwise.

Moreover, in choosing to be weak and powerless, God reaches out to become one with us. God is there to embrace us and to be a faithful traveller with us on life’s journey - in all its up’s and downs.

Friends, the Good Friday story declares that, in our hopelessness, in our disappointments, in our weakness, in our powerlessness, indeed in our suffering, our pain and in our fear, God is there.

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God is there, not to judge or to condemn. God is there not to laud it over us or put us down. God is there not to cast us aside, to make us feel inferior or to deem us inadequate.

No, God, in the person of Jesus Christ, enters into our experience and in doing so, becomes - in mercy, love and grace - one with us on life's journey.

And friends, on this sad day, this is Good News!

For, the cross is a sign – the cross is an assurance, the cross is a promise, the cross is a pledge. Here, in the crucified Christ, God offers us a new way, a way of mercy, love, grace and humble service.

Here, in the suffering Jesus, God declares that God is one with us. God is with you and God is with me.

So, today is not just another Friday. Today is "Good" Friday – and, friends, amidst the sadness and the grief, it is Good!

Thanks be to God!

Amen.



John Barr