

# Good Friday 2019

A sermon by Tom Frame (19/04/19)

*When I survey the wondrous cross  
On which the Prince of glory died  
My richest gain I count but loss  
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

What sublime words; what spiritual insight. Not fancy words; not complicated phrases. These are sentiments from the heart and from deep contemplation of the Good Friday message. The hymn writer, Isaac Watts, poetically states in words first draft in 1707 that the cross is the centre of everything for the Christian – nothing else in human history matters, nothing we can do casts a shadow on this event. Put another way, everything else only matters in reference to the cross. Our richest gain is as nothing, compared to what God does on the cross. This is an odd statement and one that few people will contemplate on this most unexpected coincidence of a public holiday with a religious holy day. The idea that a symbol of death would be a pointer to life – that's not what we would expect ... and this is why Good Friday is a mystery or a myth to so many.

As a historical reality, the cross is horrific. There is no escaping this fact. That crucifixion was ever practised is something we would rather not face. The most advanced society in those ancient times invented the cross; not unlike modern German society conceiving of the gas chamber. People continue to be crucified ... not on two pieces of wood ... but ritual cruelty remains a human pursuit and it has not been eradicated from the world.

And let us be clear about this: Jesus feared the cross – the suffering and the shame. We are told in the garden of Gethsemane he was “grieved and agitated”. He says to his disciples “I am deeply grieved, even to death”. Jesus three times prays to God for a way out – “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.” And later on “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done”. And then we are told he prayed the same words a third time.

Jesus wants another way to serve God. His prayer is like many prayers we have uttered in times of extreme difficulty – we may not have said “let this cup pass from me” – we have probably prayed something like: take this all away, save me, make it all stop, give me a break, it's all too much, I can't take it anymore. These are the prayers of desperation and probably as honest as many of our prayers ever get. Jesus then adds something more to his prayer. If this situation cannot pass, your will be done. This is his acceptance of the terrible

reality he faces. He is saying to God – if this is how things are, then please may something of your goodness, your purpose, your presence, your light ... be in it somewhere. May some good come out of it. In this prayer, Jesus hands himself over ... surrenders his future ... to the grace of God.

Our two most basic human instincts when faced with danger and difficulty are fight or flight. Jesus shows us another way ... the way of acceptance. Not defeat, not resignation, not resentment and not failure. While he doesn't seek the cross, while he doesn't welcome crucifixion, he accepts the cross, he acknowledges it stands before him ... and places his trust in God ... in that most dire of situations because he believes it is his calling, his vocation.

My recent thinking about vocation has been influenced by reading the memoir of the former Anglican Dean of Johannesburg and anti-Apartheid activist Gonville French-Beytagh. He was arrested by the white minority South African government and tried for subversion. He was convicted but later released. In his book, *Encountering Light*, written in 1975, he speaks of the centrality of the cross and its place in sensing vocation.

*“God is love, and on the cross he demonstrates this to the uttermost. But of course, it is not only God who has to sacrifice. I must also go to meet him. This is what that phrase, which gets used so glibly, about ‘taking up the cross’ means. The cross is the symbol of total sacrifice, of the breaking down of obstacles to love at whatever cost, and it is just not possible to claim to be a Christian while doing our best to evade the cross. We all do it of course, and sometimes we use a great deal of skill and effort in the process. We dance all round the cross, trying to escape a discipline, a costly decision, a situation where we are going to look fools or whatever it may be. We all see pain and suffering and demands on our patience or time as things to be avoided if we can, whereas if we were truly Christian we would see them as means, voluntary or involuntary, of sacrifice – of setting aside those things in ourselves which are obstacles to love”.*

This is another way of saying – “My richest gain I count but loss and pour contempt on all my pride”. In a society that sees success as power, wealth and beauty, possessions, position and privilege, the “cross is foolishness” words first written by St Paul 2000 years ago. To think the execution of a ragged Jew had any abiding or enduring significance was laughable, surely? But Paul goes on to reassure us “that God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”

Jesus’ journey to the cross, involves betrayal by a friend, denial by a confidante, torture inflicted by strangers, compounded by injustice, and exacerbated by mockery and murder. Jesus is abandoned by most of his followers and even, it seems, abandoned by God. He cries

out “Eli Eli lema sabachthani? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” – which, on the face of it, sounds like utter despair and a crisis of faith. Except that it’s not that at all – it is a prayer. Loss of faith would not involve addressing a god that didn’t exist or didn’t care.

Jesus prays these words from Psalm 22 – a prayer from the tradition of belief – drawing on the communal power of a faith that knows that even when all seems totally lost, God’s purposes are still at work and will be fulfilled despite any doubt or despair on our part. As Jesus prayed in Gethsemane, “if this cup cannot pass from me, your will be done.” In whatever guise suffering may come to us, in whatever form hard choices confront us ... God is present and at work in the midst of the struggle – the Cross of Christ teaches us that. We are transformed by the challenges that come our way, by the questions life asks of us.

We each come to the cross with our own weights and burdens. They may be intensely personal or overwhelmingly global. We may be fearful of where some inner angst may take us or we could be unsettled by the direction of global affairs.

Individually, financial pressures or fraught relationships may weigh us down. The threat of climate change or the reality of cyber warfare may unnerve and deprive us of confidence about the future. Whatever our struggles, we do what we can to responsibly engage with them, but beyond what we are able to manage by ourselves ... are those things that bring us to the foot of the cross. Our frailties and failures, the things we want to change about ourselves but which seem to resist our willpower, the things about the world that ought to be different but which stay defiantly the same. Here Jesus shows us, with arms outstretched, his acceptance – if this cup cannot pass, thy will be done. We must change ... we will change ... if we are to overcome our fears and frustrations about ourselves and the world.

So we come here to meet Christ in his sacrifice, to behold the wondrous cross. This might be the day we stop running from the cross, our fight against it, and to accept that we must come with open hearts to allow God to be at work within our spirits. We gaze with faith upon the cross, (it is our cross, it is the world’s cross) and we see and trust that in this cross, God’s will can be done. No matter how remote that thought seems, no matter how abandoned we feel – God and God’s goodness will prevail. God’s will can be done. For it is on the cross, although it might not seem to be so, that we actually gain a glimpse that God is love – and a love that has no end.

Let us each embrace our own cross on this Good Friday 2019.