



**Good Friday, Year A – April 22, 2011**

**A Homily preached by the Venerable M. Ansley Tucker**

It's hard to say just how we got here. (I certainly have no idea how to get back out again, nor even if it is possible.) To tell the truth, we weren't really paying all that much attention. Somehow we just got swept along. The streets in Jerusalem are narrow; the crowd was suffocatingly large, and there was mostly a lot of pushing and shoving until at last we got past the city gates, to this little clearing they call Golgotha. And the spectacle even now unfolding before our eyes is at once so strangely attractive and abominably repulsive, that I am stuck fast to my place, and I realise with some embarrassment that I am gawking. I mean, who *cares* how we got here?

It is, of course, entirely understandable that it should be the crucifixion itself which stands out in our minds as the climax and centrepiece of the story of Christ's passion. But in fact, there is more to these last hours of his life than the *dying* of Jesus, and it does matter very much how he got here. To accompany Jesus on this day is not simply to be catapulted to the gruesome finish line; it is rather to seek significance in the journey that gets us here. It is to find in the example of Jesus a pattern by which we can expect to navigate the perils and dangers of our own life.

Meaning this:

See first how lightly Jesus travels. To be sure, he is weighed down by an insupportable burden — the beam laid across his shoulders is so heavy that he crumples beneath its weight not once, not twice, but three times. But this is a burden which is *given* him to bear; it isn't as if he brought it along. And he didn't bring along any other "baggage" either. His arms were completely available to embrace the load of the cross as best he could.

David Runcorn tells the story of a man in a nursing home who had asked to see a priest. He was apparently very ill, and according to the nurses, had never before shown much interest in things religious. By the time Runcorn arrived, however, the man had had a stroke, and was unable to speak. Written into the lines of his face was the burden of some painful memory, which was now lost forever to words. The priest sat helplessly as the tears of frustration chased each other down the man's cheek. Runcorn thought ruefully of the words of a missionary-friend who would later die in the Amazon, "Make sure when the time comes to die, all you have to do is die." Learn, like Jesus, to travel light.

Secondly, for all that Jesus is effectively frogmarched through the streets of Jerusalem, this is a path he has freely chosen. And this is an insight which cuts both ways: not only does it mean that Jesus could have declined to walk the way of the cross. It also means that he only had the freedom to *begin* this journey, not to *stop* it. The minute he sent Judas out into the night to fetch that battalion of soldiers, Jesus was committed. We go the way of the cross whenever we freely choose to limit our freedom for the sake of the good that we hope will follow. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was the Lutheran pastor who was imprisoned in Nazi Germany, and shot by the Gestapo at Flossenbürg in April 1945, for his part in the failed plot against Hitler. He often meditated on his experience of confinement, with its attendant possibility of execution, and he took great comfort in the image of Christ freely accepting the cup of death in Gethsemane. Bonhoeffer wrote a series of poems called "Stations on the Road to Freedom," one of which goes like this:

*A change has come indeed. Your hands, so strong and active, are bound; ...  
Only for one blissful moment could you draw near to touch freedom;  
then, that it might be perfected in glory, you gave it to God.*

This is the way of the cross, the pattern Jesus sets before us.

More than this (and thirdly), freely to choose constraint is to walk a path where one has relinquished control. This is hard for us. You know what it is like to pour your heart and soul into a project whose very survival and execution depend on what happens when it gets into the hands of the philistines in the next floor up. No one knows what you were trying to accomplish the way you do. No one knows how you agonised over every semi-colon, or what factors went into your decision to charge a registration fee. Jesus has worked for three years to win people back for God — cajoling them, teaching them, healing them, showing them. And for three years, Jesus has called the shots. To surrender to the way of the cross means trusting in a process which is not only out of your hands, but may well be in the hands of misguided, even overtly sinful, people who haven't got the first idea what you are "on about". It is to believe that God is able to work for good even when I am not stage-managing the production. It is to believe that God can do this work even in the face of evil; it is to believe, more than this, that God is able to redeem *the evil itself*, for his own good purposes. And so we learn from Jesus to let go.

What else? Here from my vantage point at the foot of Golgotha, I look around and I am surprised at how many people there are. More to the point, I am surprised at who they are. And at who they aren't. They are not the Twelve; they are not the group Jesus had groomed for this day. Rather, they are the women, people who had until now been consigned to the periphery, people discounted by the conventions of their society. To walk the way of the cross is inevitably to be surprised by who your friends are. There are lots of people who are happy enough to be witnesses to a great event, to say they were there, but not so many who are willing to come close, not so many who are willing to have the reputation for having known, liked, or supported one who has been ruined or humiliated. And often enough those who do — like the women of Jerusalem — will be the ones who have the least to lose.

I realise that on this occasion I have come along to Golgotha as one of the spectators. It is not *my* hands which are about to be pinned to that cross-beam. And when this is the case — here at Golgotha, certainly, but no less at any "bloodletting" to which I am witness — I am compelled to examine my own heart, and to ask whether I am here as an observer, gawking, or as a friend.

One last image of the journey to Golgotha plays in my mind, and it is *the* last image — three crosses, empty, set against the sinking of the Judaeian sun. It is their emptiness which transfixes me, for it is not yet the emptiness which signifies resurrection, but it is an emptiness which signifies hope. The bodies have been removed, because we are not prepared to allow the evidence of death simply to hang there. Death will not have the last word. The Cross is not the last word.

In a sense, we have come full circle. For just as Jesus came to Golgotha travelling light, as open as possible to what lay before him, so now the cross has been relieved of its burden, its arms opened to embrace a new meaning. As one beloved prayer puts it:

*Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified; Mercifully grant that*

*we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord.*

Amen.

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