



**Good Friday – April 10, 2009**

**A Homily preached by the Rev'd Canon M. Ansley Tucker**

So there you have it — a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, as one from whom people hide their faces. For it is true, isn't it? There he hangs, his whole torso heaving for every mouthful of air, the welts of a scourging by now caked in blood, and his face twisted in unspeakable, unspoken, pain. Who wouldn't hide their face?

But hide our face, *why?* Not simply, I presume, out of some misplaced sense of squeamishness, like people reaching for the cable converter at the climax of a horror show. It is more, I think, because we know ourselves somehow to be implicated in this dying, and we can hardly bear to be reminded of it. On the one hand, we are responsible for it. We are Pilate, we are Judas, we are Peter, we are the howling mob. I look up at him who only ever willed me good, and I hide my face for shame. But note this: I also hide my face out of sheer embarrassment, for gratitude. For if in our Good Friday devotions we have learned to number ourselves among the malefactors, and to ask what we have *done*, so we must also learn to number ourselves among the beneficiaries, and to ask what has been done *for us*.

Perhaps this strikes you as the height of narcissistic self-concern. Jesus hasn't even breathed his last, and we are behaving like a pack of survivors who can hardly wait to get their hands on the will. Surely, we object, this is hardly the time to be asking what's in it for us? But this is to miss a key point. Real though our guilt be, and needful though our repentance, we must never lose sight of the fact that the death of Jesus begins in the heart of God as a gift intended for humankind. That is to say, it begins with God, not with us. It is an act of divine love long before it is an act of human hatred. And if this is so, then surely there comes a moment when the proper thing to do is to set aside the endless professions of unworthiness, and reach out our undeserving hand and accept the gift.

This naturally begs the question, What gift? There is no theologian anywhere who has answered this question to the satisfaction of every theologian everywhere. This said, I think that the answer lies somewhere in the dumbfounded recognition that God cared enough about us, was committed enough to the project of incarnation to experience — in Christ — even this. But that is only the beginning. If the passion of Jesus Christ is going to make any difference at all to the human experience of suffering, then we shall have to be able to say more to people than, "Buck up, matey; you haven't got it half as bad as Jesus." Rather, what we need to know is that Christ is somehow *part* of our sufferings — *in* them, even; we need to know that the project of incarnation is still on the books, that our God is neither reticent nor afraid to go wherever our brokenness takes us. Put another way, the cross is not an aberration, a sort of momentary lapse in the divine logic. As one writer puts it, Good Friday "is not a phase of God, but his paradigmatic way of working with the world always".

I take it that this is the point made in a much-quoted passage from Helen Waddell's novel of historical fiction, *Peter Abelard*. Abelard was the famous (and infamous) theologian of the twelfth century who was ejected from the University of Paris on account of his illicit love affair with a student named Heloise. As Waddell reconstructs the story, he subsequently retires to the woods, where he lives with his

servant Thibault. The two are a study in contrasts: Abelard the rigorous thinker, not much experienced in the ways of the world; Thibault the simple and hearty soul, who feels his way to the truth. Early one evening, at just about the time of day rabbits "go demented with fun", the two hear a piercing scream. They race to the river bank, where they find a rabbit who has sprung a trap. The story goes on:

*... The rabbit stopped shrieking when they stooped over it, either from exhaustion, or in some last extremity of fear. Thibault held the teeth of the trap apart, and Abelard gathered up the little creature in his hands. It lay for a moment breathing quickly, then in some blind recognition of the kindness that had met it at the last, the small head thrust and nestled against his arm, and it died.*

*It was the last confiding thrust that broke Abelard's heart. He looked down at the little draggled body, his mouth shaking. "Thibault," he said, "do you think there is a God at all? Whatever has come to me, I earned it. But what did this one do?"*

*Thibault nodded.*

*"I know," he said. "Only — I think God is in it, too."*

*Abelard looked up sharply.*

*"In it? Do you mean that it makes Him suffer, the way it does us?"*

*Again Thibault nodded.*

*"Then why doesn't he stop it?"*

*"I don't know," said Thibault. "Unless — unless it's like the Prodigal Son. I suppose the father could have kept him at home against his will. But what would have been the use? All this," he stroked the limp body, "is because of us. But all the time God suffers. More than we do."*

*Abelard looked at him, perplexed ...*

*"Thibault, do you mean Calvary?"*

*Thibault shook his head. "That was only a piece of it — the piece that we saw — in time. Like that." He pointed to a fallen tree beside them, sawn through the middle. "That dark ring there, it goes up and down the whole length of the tree. But you only see it where it is cut across. That is what Christ's life was; the bit of God that we saw. And we think God is like that, because Christ was like that, kind, and forgiving sins and healing people. We think God is like that for ever, because it happened once, with Christ. But not the pain. Not the agony at the last. We think that stopped."*

*Abelard looked at him, the blunt nose and the wide mouth, the honest, troubled eyes ...*

*"Then, Thibault," he said slowly, "you think that all this," he looked down at the little quiet body in his arms, "all the pain of the world, was Christ's cross?"*

*"God's cross," said Thibault. "And it goes on."*

*"The Patripassian heresy," murmured Abelard mechanically. "But, O God, if were true. Thibault, it must be. At least, there is something at the back of it that is true. And if we could find it — it would bring back the whole world."*

It is in the gospel of John, on the night before he died, that Jesus is reported to have said, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father. I am in the Father, and the Father is in me; the Father who dwells in me does his works." And Jesus gets up from the dinner table, he leads the Eleven across the Kidron valley to the Garden of Gethsemane, and there he undertakes the greatest of all his works, the work of crucifixion. Do you see that before ever we laid a hand on him, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself?

How does Abelard put it? If it were true, Thibault, if the pain of the world was God's cross, if there were even something at the back of it that were true, it would bring back the whole world.

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