

Sermon – Good Friday

The Passion Gospel according to John 18: 1 – 19:42

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We find ourselves this Friday in a place that none of us, a few months ago, would have ever thought we'd be. Isolated at home, many of you alone, possibly sad, fearful, worried about loved ones and worried about your communities. In one sense, the world has changed dramatically and rapidly over the course of a couple of months and at least for me, it has been somewhat difficult to adjust. All of what we take for granted, freedom of movement, reasonable health, family and friends and the cycle of life, seems to have been completely upended.

If we adjust the frame through which we view life and move out from the day to day to the larger picture, we can find that many people throughout the world live in this reality day after day. Many people suffer from appalling health conditions, where illnesses spread rapidly through communities because basic sanitation is absent. Many do not have freedom of movement because of government controls or conflict. Many flee their homes with nothing except hope, hoping to find a new life in a safe country where they can raise their families.

If we take an even broader view of life over the centuries we find that the world has evolved through many significant life-changing events such times of pandemic and world wars.

105 years ago in 1915, here at the Church of St Luke and St Matthew, the parish had just completed a major restoration and rebuilding program after a devastating fire the year prior. The world was at war, especially in Europe. A couple of years later a major outbreak of Spanish Flu killed many and threatened the lives of many more people here in Brooklyn. All of this must have caused havoc in this community.

In those days the church provided many of the social service functions of life from running schools and hospitals to providing food relief and community support. The parishioners of this parish must have felt then as we do now. They had their lives upended after suffering a major fire that destroyed their church buildings, a world war that cost the lives of millions, many of them young men and a flu pandemic that killed thousands, all within the space of three years.

So in one sense a lot has changed rapidly in the past few weeks, yet in the broader arc of life, these types of events have played out with much regularity. People in every age must cope with the impacts of these life changing events and find ways to care for one another so that communities come out of these crisis in much stronger ways.

On this Good Friday, we pause life to recall another dramatic and life changing event from some 2,000 years ago, when the rabbi Jesus, was betrayed, arrested, tortured and finally killed

upon the rugged cross on Calvary, for nothing more than the perception that he was a threat to the religious and political authorities.

In the beginning of the passion narrative according to John that you just heard read, we find Jesus, Peter and the other disciples in the garden of Gethsemane being confronted by Judas, who was accompanied by a detachment of soldiers. With a kiss of greeting, Judas betrayed Jesus causing his arrest. Peter's instant response was to defend Jesus and so he drew his sword and struck the ear of the high priest's slave, Malchus.

Jesus response however is key to understanding the whole passion narrative. Jesus says to Peter, "Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the father has given me." Similarly, in the passion narrative according to Matthew, heard last Sunday, Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way? "

Only Jesus knew the certainty and necessity of what was happening to him and to his friends. For the disciples, it was a terrifying moment. Their teacher and friend, the messiah of God, had been arrested, bound and taken away from them. Most of them fled the garden with only Peter and another disciple following Jesus. Eventually, Peter would deny knowledge of Jesus as a way of distancing himself from the terror that was unfolding in Jesus' arrest.

The question of 'why' might have been on every disciples' heart. Why did the Messiah of God, who was to save them from the persecution of the religious and political authorities need to die, especially in this way. Why did he not call out to his Father to send twelve legions of angels to force his release. Why did the disciples feel so scared that they could not even defend their teacher and then denied even knowing him to save their own life. Why was all this happening?

The question of 'why' resonates with a lot of people today. Some have emailed me to ask the same question – "why is this happening." I am certain many people across the world from all faiths, and none, are asking this question of why. It is a question that might have formed on your heart as well these past few weeks.

When suffering comes to our lives and indiscriminately tears through them, upending our plans, our health, our freedom of movement, our finances and our families, it is very natural for us to ask, Why?

We are as a human family extremely fragile creatures, made of tender flesh and blood and reliant on air and water to survive. Yet we are endowed with incredible ingenuity, creativity and resilience. We hold these characteristics of life in balance and live into life, making of it what we can.

Jesus was made of the same tender flesh and blood as us and experienced the range of human emotions we do. He was God, but also very much human, as we are. He was not spared suffering because of who he was and was not spared a horrific death. Today, of all days, is a day to remember the end of Jesus' human life.

Jesus knew this was his path and he followed it even though he had the power to escape it. There was a larger purpose for his suffering and death. This is where we might find solace in the 'Good' of Good Friday. The whole human family suffers at times in our lives as this is part of our human condition. Suffering is not God's punishment for our sins, it is not God's wrath against a planet that exploits its weakest members and environment and then glorifies its sporting heroes. Suffering is just part of life, and we all experience it, some however, disproportionately.

The God we know as the creator of the world, and the sustainer of our lives through the Holy Spirit, through mercy and forgiveness and through love and comfort, is ultimately good and true in all aspects. The world that was created out of nothing is wholly good, and goodness is inherent in everything. However, sometimes the good, and goodness is corrupted, often by the selfish motivations of some people. Saint Augustine famously said that evil was "the privation of good" and "the going wrong of creation in some parts."

Today, all across the world, we are facing up to the devastating impact of the coronavirus pandemic. In our facing up to all that is happening, we might see evil in its origins, evil in his indiscriminate path of destruction, and evil in the forced isolation we have to endure and the knowledge that many are dying alone. Certainly there is evil intent in the people who try and exploit the current situation or in the people who terrorize their families with increasing levels of domestic violence.

On this day of remembrance of Jesus' last few hours on earth we too can see evil in what he experienced. Evil in the betrayal of Judas, though he later repented but the damage was done; evil in the religious authorities scapegoating of Jesus, led by Caiaphas who said it was better that one man die than the whole community; evil in the treatment of Jesus and the cowardness of Pilate; and finally evil in the torturous death he suffered, crucified to a wooden cross, saved for the worst criminals.

The prevailing goodness however in Jesus' death, was his resurrection three days later, in which he defeated death once for all. He demonstrated to his friends and disciples first, before the whole world, that holding faith in the living, good and merciful God, would enable us to move through life and physical death, to a new life without losing our inherently deep connection to our creator. More on this on Easter Day.

The pandemic that surrounds us on all sides can be seen as evil as I mentioned. However, there is immense goodness on display that should be celebrated and remembered. It is the goodness of the frontline medical staff and paramedics, other hospital workers, epidemiologists, pathologists, other scientists, technicians and support staff, governors and mayors across the

world, community members who care for neighbors and the vulnerable and the many people who are fronting up to work to ensure communities operate at some level.

Goodness is found in the love we have for one another, the sadness we share as we mourn the dead and grieve with the living, and the desire that we should build more inclusive communities once again on the basis of fairness, equity and mutual respect.

Jesus lived goodness, and put himself last as a servant for all peoples. He willingly allowed himself to be the sacrificial lamb, that was so craved by those that did not put any faith in his message of hope, mercy, justice and love. Today, despite our sadness at being apart and suffering through this pandemic, we can also take time to focus on the goodness of Jesus Christ, the legacy he left us by showing us the way, the truth and how to live life.

Today we live the good and the bad of life. Today we give thanks for the sacrifice of God's son, Jesus Christ and remember that without the suffering of what we recall on this Good Friday, there would be no celebration of Easter Day.

Amen