

Good Friday  
March 25, 2016

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Why do we call this day Good Friday? It is the day that Jesus died. We see him hanging on the cross. What is good about that? What are we to make of the death of Jesus? What account do we make of the meaning and significance of his death? How do we make sense of that?

Atonement is a word that is often associated with Good Friday. Theologians have taught us for centuries that atonement is what happens today. On the cross Jesus atones for our sins. The most common way to think of this is to imagine a balance scale. In one pan goes all the sins mankind has ever committed and all the sins mankind ever will commit. It is a huge pile of stuff and the pan sinks way down. Then God comes along and puts the death of his own son in the other pan. It now balances.

If you want to believe that I can't stop you. I don't believe it, or at least not in that way. In the first place, it is not clear to me how one more cruel and unjust death is going to help humankind. Second, it makes God harsh and punitive, requiring blood to pay for our misdoings. If I can forgive someone who harms me without requiring blood, and if God cannot, then God is more cruel and vindictive than I. I don't buy that. Let's try again.

Atonement. It comes from Middle English and really is a compound of at-onement. It means reconciliation. The Greek word that it translates is *katallage* or *katalasso*. It means something like the facing of difference, or reconciliation. It means the coming together of two people who have been estranged. It describes the embrace the Father gives the prodigal son when he finally returns home.

Sin is that which separates us from God. Yet God never leaves us; it is we who leave God. And when we leave God, when we wander far in a land that is waste, then we die. We die in one way or another. We die sooner or later. When we separate ourselves from life we die. The cross is the answer to this death.

In the Old Testament, sins were dealt with by a system of sacrifices. If you committed a sin, you brought a sacrifice to the altar, and its blood was shed as expiation for the sin. Later on the prophet Isaiah teaches us that what God really wants is a broken and contrite heart. The point of the blood sacrifice was not to pay off God, but to represent in concrete action the depth of our remorse and repentance. The trouble is that we keep on sinning. We keep on doing what we want instead of serving God and others. We are addicted to our own self interest. No matter how hard we try to love, we keep failing. The result is that the more conscientious one is, the more serious about one's morality one is, the more the horror of the crucifixion is a mirror of our own sin.

What Jesus does on the Cross is to change the game entirely. He is confronting death. Not just his own death but all death—Death with a capital D. He has overturned the tables in the temple on which we trade sins for virtues, remorse for absolution. All God cares about is getting his children back. God stands there through the ages looking at the miseries of the human race with tears streaming down his face and crying, “My children, my sons, my daughters, please stop your fighting, your hating. Stop beating each other up, stop fighting over the toys I have given you. Learn to share, be kind, and please, please come home to me so I can embrace you. Come to my table and feast.”

The blood of Christ on the cross is the tears of God. His suffering is the suffering we cause God by our selfishness, fear, and avarice. It is also the sum of all the suffering of the human race. It is a picture of the horror and betrayal of our own thoughts and deeds.

### The Musician

A memory of Kreisler once:

At some recital in this same city,

The seats all taken, I found myself pushed  
On to the stage with a few others,  
So near that I could see the toil  
Of his face muscles, a pulse like a moth  
Fluttering under the fine skin,  
And the indelible veins of his smooth brow.  
I could see, too, the twitching of the fingers,  
Caught temporarily in art's neurosis,  
As we sat there or warmly applauded  
This player who so beautifully suffered  
For each of us upon his instrument.

So it must have been on Calvary  
In the fiercer light of the thorn's halo:  
The men standing by and that figure  
The hands bleeding, the mind bruised but calm,  
Making such music as lives still.  
And no-one daring to interrupt  
Because it was himself that he played  
And closer than all of them the God listened.

But the cross is more than an elaborate visual aid to make visible to us God's pain. The death of Jesus Christ on a cross in Palestine almost two thousand years ago actually did something. It did something unique and timeless. It brought Humanity and God back together again. It defeated death. In some way that I do not understand, the cross is the hinge on which the door to life, joy, freedom, and salvation swings open.

Now you may have noticed that humanity is not in fact in much better shape than it was then. We are not noticeably more moral, or kind, or generous, or just, than we were twenty

centuries ago. What is true is that because of that event we are able to break out of our ruts if we choose to. We can break free of our bonds if we wish. We can overcome our addictions. We can stop playing the game of guilt and start playing the new game of life, if we want. We can be reconciled to God and each other, if we choose.

The cross will probably always be a puzzle to me. To meditate on the cross is to put oneself in the presence of the mystery of God's love and God's power. Instead of meeting the power of evil with simple force, God allows evil to run its full course like an ocean wave that runs up on the beach until it spends itself. Even death can't kill Jesus. Evil, even ultimate evil is part of the creation; it can never triumph over the Creator. The Cross will always remind me of the pain we humans cause God. It will also tell me that whatever pain I may be suffering, whatever betrayal I may have experienced, it is nailed to the cross, too. The Cross will always tell me that for God, the price of love is never, ever too high. It will always give me new, free life to replace the knowledge of my good and evil. The Cross tells me that God has done all that is necessary to bring me home.

Hear the words of a Russian mystic in a poem on the 12th Station of the Cross:

Alone  
 God-Man  
 He hung  
 Between  
 Heaven and earth;  
 Fruit of the Tree . . .  
 Love Incarnate!

Death crouched  
 At his feet . . .  
 Afraid to touch  
 The Deathless  
 One!

Yet it was to be.  
 Slowly,  
 Arising  
 As in a dream  
 Death  
 Stood on tiptoes  
 Tall and slim.

The crowd that  
 Came  
 To see Him die  
 Felt fear  
 And cold  
 Enter their hearts.

With awe  
 And gentleness  
 Death touched  
 His lips . . .  
 He blessed

Her back  
 With just  
 One glance  
 And died  
 Of Love

Since then  
 Death became—  
 LIFE.

Let us be filled with its strength and joy. Let us be reconciled with each other and with God. Let us be at one. In a few minutes we will have an opportunity venerate the cross. We will acknowledge that in Jesus, God has done all that can be done, and all that needs to be done, to deal with our sin, to bridge the chasm between us and God, to bring us home.

Today we meet God's ferocious, victorious, and tender love. It is a good Good Friday.