

Talk for Good Friday 2016
12.30pm at St Mary's, Upper Street.
John Beauchamp

Reading: Luke 15:16-27

Talk:

They crucified two robbers with him, one on his right and one on his left.
One on his right and one on his left, and Jesus in the middle.

It is traditional in many of our Good Friday images to depict 3 crosses on a hill. Two small ones on either side and one larger one in the centre. As if for some reason Jesus' cross towered above the crosses of the two criminals who were crucified with him that day. I've always wondered why this would be so. Were people trying to suggest that Jesus was above the criminals? Were they trying to suggest that somehow he was separate from them in some way? I don't know what the intention was or is, but what I do know is that it actually makes something of a nonsense of what today is really all about.

All 4 of the Gospel writers tell us about the 2 criminals. And all 4 tell us that Jesus was crucified with one on his left and one on his right. Just to emphasise the point, John says: they crucified him, and with him two others- one on each side and Jesus in the middle.
one on each side and Jesus in the middle.

Why is this so important? Well simply because it sums up what today is all about. For if today is about anything, it is about Jesus being in the middle. It is about Jesus entering into the middle, the very centre. That's why the 3 crosses image with a bigger central cross is so misleading and unhelpful. For Jesus was not lifted up above others in his crucifixion. He was not somehow given a bigger and better cross. No, with a criminal on his left and a criminal on his right and Jesus in the middle, God entered into the very centre of the very worst of all our human experiences. Not standing above, not standing apart, but standing with, with you, with me, with us, even at the moments of deepest darkness that we face at different times in our lives.

This is really important. It's important if we are going to make sense of our lives and if we are going to make sense of our faith. For what is very evident is that being a Christian, putting your faith and trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, does not give you any immunity from the pain and suffering of life. It doesn't lift you above it in any way. No, as Christians, just like all human beings, we often find ourselves in the middle. In the middle of pain and suffering and many unanswerable questions.

What is really important to acknowledge and understand is that Jesus was not lifted up in crucifixion, he was not exalted in his crucifixion, no he entered fully into the same crucifixion that these criminals suffered, and he did it at their level. He shared their experience fully in every way.

It is important because we need to know that when we face these dark times, Jesus really does know how we feel. He really does know what we are experiencing, and he really is willing, ready, eager, longing to enter into these dark places with us. He is always willing and ready to walk the way of the cross again and walk with us into our places of suffering and pain and loss and brokenness and anger and unanswered questions.

Jesus did not die with a smile on his face! He didn't die with a look of contentment that came from an understanding that he was saving the world. I am convinced that he didn't even die knowing with any certainty that resurrection was to follow. No, in this moment Jesus is entering fully into death. Entering fully into every aspect of its fear and pain and suffering and darkness and struggle. And to do that, he has to give everything up to death. Everything of himself, he can keep nothing back. No, Jesus did not die with a smile on his face. He died in twisted, tortured agony, and with cries that bore on them the depth of his pain and suffering. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me! Father, into your hands I commit my spirit! It is finished!

And the extraordinary thing here is that, as this thick, black, impenetrable darkness surrounds and crushes Jesus. As he gives himself to its fury, he fills the middle. He fills the centre. He fills the centre of every dark moment we experience. He fills it, so that when we find ourselves in the middle, when we find the darkness pressing in around us, we know we can never be alone, we can never have to bear its full force and weight alone.

All of us find ourselves in the middle at different times in our lives. At this time many people here at Saint Mary's and from other churches in this area are in the middle. In the middle of grief, in the middle of sadness, in the middle of many unanswerable questions, even in the middle of anger. Jennifer's death has left many of us in the middle of something that we find it hard to even believe, let alone understand or rationalise or accept.

But as we gaze at the cross today, as we gaze at Jesus crucified, crucified with two criminals, one on his right and one on his left, and Jesus in the middle, we can know with all certainty that the middle is not an empty place. It is not a forsaken place. No, it is a place filled with Christ. It is a place filled with his extraordinary love and grace. Love and grace that is forged in the fire of pain and suffering, so that even in our worst place of pain and suffering, love and grace can still break through.

Today we thank God. We thank God for the lengths he was prepared to go to. We thank God that in Jesus he was willing to enter into the middle, the very centre of all of our pain and suffering. And we thank God that even now, even today, he still inhabits the middle, he still fills the centre. He still fills and inhabits the centre of whatever you are experiencing, no matter how dark you may feel that may be.

They crucified two criminals with him. One on his left and the other on his right, and Jesus in the middle.

Let us pray:

Lord,
As we gaze at Jesus today,
As we see him in the middle,
We thank you that even today we can find you still in the middle.
Dying Lord, come fill the middle of all that we experience,
Grief, loss, pain, brokenness, distress, emptiness, sadness,
That as we find you in the middle,
Our lives may be transformed,
And your seeds of Easter hope may be planted.
Lord, meet us in the middle and lead us into new joy.
In your most precious name we pray. Amen.