

Sermon

'Good Friday'

15 April 2022



There we were. In the front row of the Melbourne Recital Centre. The wood-panelled room gave us the impression of being in a beautiful garden. My wife Lucy and I were there to witness a performance of the *Passion*, by Johannes Sebastian Bach. The tickets were a gift to celebrate my graduation from my Masters in Theology. I'd had a difficult year—a wilderness experience of sorts—so to find myself there, was a gift and a total surprise.

The music began with a mighty procession in E minor summoning us to the cross:

Come, help me lament!

...

See him! How? Like a lamb!

See! What? See his patience.

See! Where? See our guilt.

See him, out of love and graciousness,
Himself carrying the wood of the cross.

O guiltless Lamb of God,

Slaughtered on the stem of the cross,

Always found patient,

Although you were despised,

All sin have you borne,

Else we must have despaired.

Have mercy on us, O Jesus!

On that afternoon in Holy Week, through Bach's glorious and heart-rending music, we witnessed Jesus' suffering on the cross; and finally, his death.

In that moment, the music ended. And in that moment, in the sheer silence, I saw him. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

And I saw myself. Forgiven. And in the front row of the kingdom of heaven.

'Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with grief. Like one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised, and we esteemed him not. But ours was the suffering he bore, ours the torment he endured. Upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his stripes, we are healed. We all like sheep had gone astray, all taking our own way, but the Lord laid on him, the injustice of us all.'

Not in your merit. Not in your success. Not in all of your worldly achievement. But in abandonment. In grief. In the night time of the soul. See him! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, writes of God's gift of salvation, 'All we need to know is that whatever it took – and takes – for us to be set free *has been done* through what happened on Good Friday. The single central thing that we need to grasp is the conviction that for us to be at peace, Jesus life had to be given up. There is an open door that exists in the heart of every situation - a way to peace and praise from any imaginable place. Jesus is there in every human experience. And so every place, has changed.'

For the ancient Jewish people, the hope of this world, for peace on earth, for a world made right, for justice, in an unjust world, was located, not in the ongoing political order of the world, not in the ongoing, human, often evil empires, of this world, but in God, the one and only God, and in God alone. This hope, in turn, was located at the hands of God's promised Messiah, God's promised King, who, when he came, would establish the kingdom of God himself in this world, in place of the kingdoms of this world. So that, more than 500 years before the coming of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah foresaw:

'Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.'

Today is the day. The fulfilment of prophecy. The fulfilment, of the hope of

the world. For the kingdom of God himself, in replacement of all of the human political kingdoms of the world, which remain, and which are ongoing.

For Christianity, this vision of the Jewish people, was fulfilled in the man Jesus. Crucified as a messianic pretender, by raising Jesus from the dead, God judged the world. For the guilt of messianic pretence, which is blasphemy, which led it to crucify Jesus, the one innocent human being. The one human being, who in this life was obedient to God, to the point of death. The one true human being, who, in the form of a human being, refused the temptation, to want to be God. And, by that refusal, which is a radical refusal, has revealed the way to eternal life. By raising Jesus from the dead, God himself confirmed Jesus to be the Messiah. Who died, literally, in place of this world of human sin. Who died, as an act of redemption, once for all, for the human race.

Within Christianity, God's vision, for peace on earth, for a world made right, for justice, at the hands of the coming Messiah, was fulfilled in Jesus. The Christ, the Messiah of God, his death, was God's once for all action, on behalf of the human race, to redeem this world of sin. To reconcile the human race to God. To inaugurate the dawning, of hope in this world. The dawning of the kingdom of God himself. The dawning of the new creation of the world. Now come in Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah of God, the new Jerusalem, come down out of heaven from God, with the wisdom, the power, the authority, and the vision of God himself.

‘Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea (the Old Testament symbol for the persistent power of evil in the world), was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.”

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.’

In Jesus Christ, the Messiah of God, God’s promise to the world, was fulfilled. It is not yet the day. The long dark night of this world continues. The first things remain. It is not yet the end. But in the dawn, there is the herald of a new day. In Jesus Christ, the Messiah of God, by his life of

obedience to God, by his death that was the reconciliation of this world to himself, and by his resurrection from the dead, that is the promise of the resurrection of this world, and the liberation of creation itself from its present bondage to corruptibility, the new day, has dawned. We glimpse the first light, of the kingdom of God himself. We glimpse, who God is. We catch a glimpse of the God who is, purely future. In Jesus Christ, we glimpse the dawning of the new day.

In the meantime, the present world, the first things, continue. Where there is that serpent, that, whispering into the inner ear of Eve, seduces her into eating from the forbidden fruit. The fruit that God had strictly forbidden his human creatures from eating, the fruits of the tree in the middle of the garden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, because on the day they eat it, they will surely die. How did this happen? The serpent seduced Eve with deception ‘You will not die, for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be open and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ With the seductive lie that human beings can be powerful to know everything and to judge everything.

The desire for the fulness of life, for a fuller and richer life, for the life of God himself, becomes the occasion for the violation by human beings of the divine commandment. The crossing of that line, that cannot be crossed. Between God as the one, true God, the Creator and sustainer of heaven and earth, the source of all life, without whom all things would cease to be, and

human beings, the human creature, this whole world of individual human beings.

But the desire to turn against God and his commandment is already sin. The natural human sin of pride. The pride that turns away from God. The pride that turns inward upon itself. That arouses within us, the illusion, of the fulness of life. But that delivers us, into death. It is the deception that defeats us. By which we are undone, as human beings, who were made, and who are destined, for the image of God.

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Though they die in this world of sin, this first world, the first things, die, into eternal life, the eternal kingdom of God, the last things. The act of faith is like a trust fall, out of the first world, into the last. The last things, of eternal life. The last things, of a world without end. The last things, of the kingdom of God, now dawned in the world, in Jesus Christ, the Messiah of God.

It is not yet the day. It is only the dawn. But the dawn heralds the day. There is hope, for us, and for the world.

The Passion of Jesus Christ, the messiah of God, was the once for all act of God, to reconcile a lost world, these 'first things' to himself. The reconciliation of the world, through the death of Jesus Christ, contained

within it, already now, God's overcoming of evil, God's deliverance from the powers of this world, of sin and death.

There is, of course, as is plain to anyone reading a newspaper or browsing the internet, still the obvious need of a future perfection, which is possible only after this earthly life, and towards which the expectation of the Christian is directed. As a once for all, historical event, to reconcile this world to God, the past event of salvation, the Passion of Christ, is one with the future of salvation. Is related to the final coming, of the kingdom of God. And it is so by way of an anticipation. An anticipation, that calls for a final enforcement, a final act of God, the coming of the day, on which its own power and truth already depends. Because it is already now, an act from the future. The inbreaking of the future, in the present time.

At the coming of this future, at Christ's return, there will be that change for which the human race, and the cosmos itself, is groaning, as in labour pains. And we ourselves along with that, as we await the redemption of our own bodies, as Paul says. But this future world change has broken in already in all who are baptised, and believe. All of this happens, by the power of God's Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. Poured out into our hearts at our baptism, it is there to bubble up within our hearts throughout this earthly life, preparing us for, assuring us of, eternal life, in the next. By our reconciliation to God, there is this change, already now, within our hearts. In the life of the one who accepts this invitation that God has issued to us and to the world in Jesus Christ, for reconciliation with God, there is

this change, from the state of distance and estrangement from God, to the state of fellowship with him. There is present already now, as an anticipation, that fellowship with God, that participation in his eternal life, that is the future destiny of the believer. That is the future destiny, of the human race, and of creation itself. Present, too, is the overcoming of that wickedness and evil, that go along with the creature's alienation from God, that seem to give the creature that is thus separated, the occasion for complaint against God.

In Jesus own day, under the influence of the zealots of the day, the people of God had fallen into temptation. The temptation, the false and foolish hope, of a this worldly redemption. Of the overcoming of all suffering, in this present world, by political means. The one obedient human being, Jesus rejected this false messianic expectation, as well as the title Messiah, in his earthly life. It was this false messianic hope that led them to crucify him, the Messiah, the Christ of God. And to their failure to be reconciled to God, when the Son of God came, not as a political liberator, but as the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.

In the first century of the Christian era, the antichristian spirit was seen in the many false teachers, the false prophets, whose seductive teachings, would woo away from true Messiah. At the beginning of the 21st century, we see it in the many alternative, especially this worldly doctrines of redemption, to which our modern secular societies are now exposed.

This leads to the fact of our finding ourselves as basically the same cultural situation, as Paul found himself in, two millennia ago, where the word Greek means simply non-Jewish:

‘For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing

things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

Today is Good Friday. Why do we call it good?

Because today, the kingdom of the world, has become, the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.