

GOOD FRIDAY

7 APRIL 2023

Isaiah 52. 13 – 53. 12

Hebrews 10. 16-25

Matthew 27. 1-66

April is the month when we remember sacrifices. At Easter we remember the sacrifice of Jesus and, to some extent still, our nation stops out of respect for the solemnity of this day. In April we also stop for ANZAC day and mark the sacrifice of too many young men and women in wars in this nation's short history.

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Being new in ministry, and as the son of a returned man with my own misgivings about ANZAC Day, along with the escalation of language at the time around country and sacrifice and the predilection of the current crop of politicians to feed off the memory of the fallen, I paid careful attention to what was going on. And the next time I led a funeral of a returned man, I also paid careful attention to the language of the RSL service; what was said, how their war service was spoken of, how their memory was invoked, how their membership of the fallen was now cemented. What was said about sacrifice.

I paid careful attention because what the flags and funerals debacle outed was a hazy line, a blurred line, between the sacrifice of Jesus and the sacrifice of soldiers. And it touched on something very sensitive.

What has struck me about reading Matthew's Passion this year is Jesus' silence. Just two times he speaks: When Pilate asks him: 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus simply responds, 'You say so.' He gives no response to the charges laid. And then there is the cry from the cross: 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?'

All around him everyone else has a lot to say: the crowds, the legal people, the high priest and religious leaders, the soldiers, the two criminals, those who are passing by the grisly spectacle - all mock him, directing their collective bile against this innocent man. As we will sing later: why? What has my Lord done?

Jesus is nailed to the cross in full knowledge of what was likely to take place for him. He knew this would be his lot. He knew what would be exacted against him. Still, he went. *See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death;*

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expressions in the church about what it is that happens on the cross - often we express these things most in our hymns. They shape out theology:

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Glory be to Jesus,
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He died that we might be forgiven,
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And when I think that God, his Son not sparing,
Sent him to die, I scarce can take it in,
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What did Jesus think he was doing on the cross? I am not sure he was thinking of me, Andrew Boyle of 32 Willow St Preston in the year 2023 when he was on the cross. I cringe when a hymn invites me to sing that his death was for me! But this is how we have come to construe what is taking place on the cross in our individualistic age – Jesus as my personal saviour. Like having my own personal trainer, I also have my own personal saviour.

For Matthew there are cosmic implications of this death – the darkness which descends at noon, the earthquake, the tearing of the temple curtain, from top to bottom, all speak of a kind of cosmic interruption in this death.

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I raise the issue of sacrifice and ANZAC Day because, while we lay great store by soldiers' sacrifice it is they who are offered by others. They are sacrificed by leaders, by our collective bile against some perceived enemy. They are offered up in order that we can attain some kind of faux unity – at the expense of others. The strange thing about this language of sacrifice is that we say that Jesus was sacrificed by the chief priests and elders and his execution was carried out by the Roman authorities. And we say about young soldiers that we are grateful for their sacrifice; what they have done for us. The freedom they have won for us. How they fought for democracy and

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And as we read the passion, we can also allow ourselves to think that it is the chief priests and elders and the Roman authorities who sacrifice Jesus. This misreading was the motivation for so much antisemitism through European history, culminating in the horror of the Holocaust. This blaming all those around Jesus would be to misread Jesus' agency in what takes place, though. Because Jesus knows what will take place. And he offers himself into this space. Allows himself to be sacrificed in full knowledge of what will eventuate. This is not others sacrificing Jesus. And it is not God sacrificing Jesus on our behalf. That would be to pervert the relationship between the Father and the beloved son. To say that God sacrifices Jesus would be to make God like us, with our need to sacrifice others for our own peace and unity.

The French philosopher, Rene Girard, who died a couple of years ago, spent his life studying societies through their literature, their rituals and their culture, observing how it was and continues to be that all societies, tribes, groups, communities hold together by scapegoating and sacrificing some individual or group who they decide – usually unconsciously – is the root of all their woes. The pattern of behaviour is that by sacrificing this person or group we will maintain or regain our unity when it is falling apart. Girard's contention is that the Hebrew and Christian scriptures wrestle with this practice of scapegoating – from its very earliest texts - and that they come to fruition in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. Girard's contention is that Jesus offers himself to us as scapegoat and reveals to us how it is that we maintain our peace – by victimising and scapegoating others. Jesus offers himself to us as victim – in all his goodness, in all his innocence, in all his self-knowledge, in all his mercy and compassion; and as the beloved Son - and gives himself over to human cruelty.

Matthew portrays the events on Golgotha as having cosmic implications – the balance of the earth is tilted – the very foundations of the world are shaken, as they are again on the morning of the resurrection.

We are invited to behold and see what this death means; what this one, lone, solitary, determined, self-conscious death means for our self-understanding. And we are invited to behold and see how it is that might be and determine to be in the world. How we might reject the way of violence and victimisation and embrace the path of mercy and compassion shown to us by Jesus

The letter to the Hebrews expresses this invitation which comes to us through the cross - since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds,

In this once and sufficient sacrifice on the cross we are invited to give up our sacrificing of others and bask in the generous and all-embracing love of God - to fulfill God's desire for all creation.

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All around him everyone else has a lot to say: the crowds, the legal people, the high priest and religious leaders, the soldiers, the two criminals, those who are passing by the grisly spectacle - all mock him, directing their collective bile against this innocent man. As we will sing later: why? What has my Lord done?

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I raise the issue of sacrifice and ANZAC Day because, while we lay great store by soldiers' sacrifice it is they who are offered by others. They are sacrificed by leaders, by our collective bile against some perceived enemy. They are offered up in order that we can attain some kind of faux unity – at the expense of others. The strange thing about this language of sacrifice is that we say that Jesus was sacrificed by the chief priests and elders and his execution was carried out by the Roman authorities. And we say about young soldiers that we are grateful for their sacrifice; what they have done for us. The freedom they have won for us. How they fought for democracy and

against oppression. But they didn't know what they were going to. So many of the stories of young Australian men going to war are tales of derring-do, going off for a bit of a lark with their mates; all enlisting together. In truth they are sacrificed by politicians and so-called leaders, who are prepared to offer them as sacrifice to their political ideologies, their incompetence, or their simple lust for power. What madness is it that drives Vladimir Putin, that he's willing to sacrifice so many – all for the glory of mother Russia. These young men and women *are* sacrificed.

And as we read the passion, we can also allow ourselves to think that it is the chief priests and elders and the Roman authorities who sacrifice Jesus. This misreading was the motivation for so much antisemitism through European history, culminating in the horror of the Holocaust. This blaming all those around Jesus would be to misread Jesus' agency in what takes place, though. Because Jesus knows what will take place. And he offers himself into this space. Allows himself to be sacrificed in full knowledge of what will eventuate. This is not others sacrificing Jesus. And it is not God sacrificing Jesus on our behalf. That would be to pervert the relationship between the Father and the beloved son. To say that God sacrifices Jesus would be to make God like us, with our need to sacrifice others for our own peace and unity.

The French philosopher, Rene Girard, who died a couple of years ago, spent his life studying societies through their literature, their rituals and their culture, observing how it was and continues to be that all societies, tribes, groups, communities hold together by scapegoating and sacrificing some individual or group who they decide – usually unconsciously – is the root of all their woes. The pattern of behaviour is that by sacrificing this person or group we will maintain or regain our unity when it is falling apart. Girard's contention is that the Hebrew and Christian scriptures wrestle with this practice of scapegoating – from its very earliest texts - and that they come to fruition in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. Girard's contention is that Jesus offers himself to us as scapegoat and reveals to us how it is that we maintain our peace – by victimising and scapegoating others. Jesus offers himself to us as victim – in all his goodness, in all his innocence, in all his self-knowledge, in all his mercy and compassion; and as the beloved Son - and gives himself over to human cruelty.

Matthew portrays the events on Golgotha as having cosmic implications – the balance of the earth is tilted – the very foundations of the world are shaken, as they are again on the morning of the resurrection.

We are invited to behold and see what this death means; what this one, lone, solitary, determined, self-conscious death means for our self-understanding. And we are invited to behold and see how it is that might be and determine to be in the world. How we might reject the way of violence and victimisation and embrace the path of mercy and compassion shown to us by Jesus

The letter to the Hebrews expresses this invitation which comes to us through the cross - since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds,

In this once and sufficient sacrifice on the cross we are invited to give up our sacrificing of others and bask in the generous and all-embracing love of God - to fulfill God's desire for all creation.

With joy we embrace this way and pray for grace and courage as we continue on this path in Christ.

Andrew Boyle