

Good Friday  
St Peter's Box Hill 2008

## THE POWER OF LOVE VERSUS THE LOVE OF POWER

To read and hear John's account of the Passion is to be led into a conflict between The Power of Love and the Love of Power."

At first appearance the love of power is the absolute winner.

Jesus arrested in the garden with soldiers from the chief priests and Pharisees,

Judas the betrayer,

Simon Peter using the sword to defend Jesus,

the trials of Jesus,

the brutality of soldiers interrogating and humiliating a prisoner,

the crowd seeking to cling to illusions of power by mob control, yet manipulated by the power of authorities to pursue their purpose;

the actual execution of Jesus, even to the indignity of breaking the dying victim's legs or in the case of Jesus thrusting a spear into his side.

All of this shows the love of power that lies at the basis of so much of our contemporary society. To be sure we have softened it somewhat. We undertake our brutality by remote control and feel that our hands are clean. When we analyse the gospel accounts of the passion very closely we can all identify the same power grabs, prejudices and desire to control.

The love of power is very present today as it was in Jerusalem 33 ad.

By contrast the passion readings highlight the power of love. Nor is love expressed as weak or pious. It is strong, sensitive, transparent and very vulnerable.

Jesus does not attempt any subterfuge. He asks soldiers who come to make the arrest; "Whom do you seek"

"I am he" "Put your sword into its sheath.

He challenges the inquisitors.

He responds to Pilate.

Yet through it all there is exhibited a quiet dignity, an inner strength - the power of love.

In the midst of incredible suffering; Woman behold your son. Luke's account of the Cross-indicates that he reached out to a thief crucified beside him. "This day you will be with me in paradise."

Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

What we see at Calvary is the Power of Love versus the Love of Power.

Our liturgical celebration of Good Friday is designed to highlight that reality not as a point of history but a very present reality. That battle still continues for the hearts of people. That battle is still played out in the headlines of our newspapers, in the utterances of our leaders and in many homes within our community.

As I look into my own life and motives I can identify its presence in so many ways. If we are honest I suspect that is true for each one of us.

It has profound implications for the way we face life, respond to others, understand ourselves and in the way we define and relate to God.

In the remainder of this address I wish to pursue several of these implications.

The contrast between the power of love and the love of power

#### (1 ) IMPACTS UPON HOW WE DEFINE OUR RELATIONSHIP TO GOD AND OTHERS.

Unfortunately many Christians have allowed their vision of God to be distorted by the love of power rather than the power of love. The very gospel we have read this day has been used throughout history as a justification for persecuting and punishing the Jewish race as "God killers."

Most serious scholars who reflect upon the horror of the holocaust acknowledge that misinterpretation of Christian theology was a contributing factor that allowed the Nazis to perpetrate their horrors.

Christian history does have many stains upon its copybook in its love of power rather than the power of love. Nor are we of the twentieth century Church exempt.

There is even a movement which focuses on "signs and wonders" as a power for evangelism.

But Good Friday is no oasis remote from the experience and reality of life. Some Christians in fact make the mistake of trying to avoid and evade its reality. They give the impression that God disappears at the Cross and reappears on Easter morning. Christian proclamation of the cross begins with the understanding that even in Jesus sense of utter abandonment, God was nevertheless present.

The Cross-demonstrates divine power identified with the weak. Those who expect God to come and physically throw out the enemy are mistaken. Suffering, cruelty, wars and their cost in innocent lives remain realities of human life and experience. Disciples must learn to find God at work in the sufferings of the present. During the Maundy Thursday Service we focussed on the commandment to love one another symbolised in the foot washing and the Last Supper.

The crucifixion and the commandment to love go hand in hand, because it is impossible to understand what Jesus love is if it is separated from his death on the cross. The resurrection stories will affirm the transforming power of this love to reshape the world, but it is to the cross we must look to understand Jesus' love and hence to understand who Jesus and God are.

The crucifixion stands as a reminder that the love of God is neither soft nor simply affective, Love is not simply an emotion, but rather it defines the very essence of character and identity. To say that God is love, that Jesus is love is to say that they love without limits, without conditions and that they love to the limits. They also love freely.

The Cross-defines our relationship to God and to one another. If the fullness of God is revealed in the incarnation - the birth of Jesus and the crucifixion brings that work to fulfilment, then for Jesus followers to love as he loves means to embrace the cross as the ultimate measure of fidelity to God.

When the author of I John writes, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out all fear", it is to the love of Jesus on the cross that he refers. If we love enough to know that we will give our life, our all, to those we love, what is there to fear? To live in, and out of, such love is to live fully in the presence of God.

As I reflect upon those words an initial response is to say;" How can I live in the face of such a commandment? in the face of sch a model to love?

There is no easy or simple answer, but there is the story of Jesus own life and death to which Good Friday calls us to return. In this story of Jesus love, one can catch an understanding of what it means to be a community of love, to see and know God fully in the midst of life and death.

I find the image of "the Crucified God" to be helpful at this point. "Faith in the crucified God does offer me a new insight and understanding into the practice of prayer. Through God's self-humiliation in the death of Christ, God creates the conditions for communion with himself. So God is known and loved in the pain of the dying Christ. When I open myself to the crucified God I am opening myself to one who knows - better than I do myself- the depth and intensity of the pain that I can experience. I have the assurance that someone loves and someone cares.

The theme of the power of love as against the love of power  
(2) OPENS UP THE ISSUE OF HUMAN SUFFERING.

Suffering is such a personal, invasive experience that varies from person to person.

The CROSS-is not an explanation of human suffering, but a sign of the God who suffers with us; and the offering of a power to uphold and bear us.

Moltmann sees his understanding of the crucified God to have important consequences for our response to the presence of God in the sufferings of others. God bears in his heart all the wounds of the human family, and it is through the encounter with pain and suffering that we come to see the meaning of God's presence in the world.

Weisel; a survivor of one of the Nazi concentration camps tells of the execution of two Jewish men and boy before the other inmates of the camp.

" The SS hang two Jewish men and a boy. The men died quickly, but the death struggle of the boy lasted half an hour. " Where is God? Where is he? " A man behind me asked. As the boy after a

long time was still in agony on the rope, I heard the man cry again"  
Where is God now?"

And I heard a voice within me answer," Here he is - he is hanging here on this gallows."

So the Crucified Christ - the crucified God can be seen and identified in the tortured figures and countless victims of human sin, oppression and cruelty. Calling for our response and support.

I quote Leech again,

" To be a Christian is to be a follower of the crucified, a cross-bearer, Christian discipleship is thus more than admiration of a past event, more even than imitation of that event; it is a real sharing in the passion and death of Christ a " participation in the powerlessness of God in the world."

Yet that powerlessness is not without strength.

Like most Parish Priests I have both experienced suffering for myself and faced it with others. Ultimately when we face suffering, God does not remove the wound, but God will bring it healing. You may never again be as carefree but God does bring a new serenity and peace. It is God's gift of Himself that can make us whole -even in our suffering.

The image of the crucified God has some profound implications for our understanding of God, prayer and suffering.

"Through the centuries Christians have worshipped a crucified God, a suffering God, a God put to death that we might have life. The cross is the heart of Christian knowledge, of Christian experience, of Christian preaching and of Christian prayer"

Leech, The True God. Page 322.

In the Cross . We come to understand what the Evangelist celebrates when he writes;" From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

That grace is the power to love rather than the love of power. On this Good Friday the choice for each of us is

"Which power will you choose? The power to love or the love of power?"