

## God's Friday

Mark 14-15

### Text: Mark 15:34, 37

At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' ... Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last.

### Introduction

Last Saturday, March 27, the Jewish Passover began. In Passover services throughout the Jewish community a young child asks his parents, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" It's assumed it's important that the child know why this night is different from all others. It's assumed as well that the child's parents can tell her why.

At some point our children have asked us or will ask us, "Why is this Friday different from all other Fridays? Why do we call Good Friday 'good'? It's important that our children know why. And we, their parents and grandparents, should be able to tell them.

The quickest answer is "Good Friday is the day on which Jesus died." But our children will still have many questions: "Why do we make so much of the death of Jesus? When aunt Susie died last year no one at the funeral said it was good." Children persist. "Is it because Jesus' death was unusually painful or distressing?" But lots have died in greater physical pain and distress. "Then why is this Friday different from all others?"

'Good Friday' is a modern expression. In the mediaeval era Christians spoke of God's Friday. For on this day God acted definitively on behalf of humankind. On this day God did something apart from which the human predicament would be hopeless. He did something apart from which we would have remained helpless. This Friday, God's Friday, has eternal significance for the entire human creation.

1. As we ponder what God did and why he did it the truth about us humans begins to settle upon us. We read the all-time favourite parable of the lost son, and we hear the father cry, "My son was lost. He was dead." Lost? Dead? Do these words really describe the situation of sinful humankind before God? Surely Jesus didn't mean that unbelief has consequences as serious as this. ('Lost, dead.')

And then our eyes alight on a few words with which Jesus introduces a teaching to his disciples: "If you fellows, evil as you are..." He's talking to disciples, to his friends, not to atheists or moral degenerates; to disciples. And to them he says, matter of factly, as if what he's saying were so obvious no one could disagree, "If you fellows, evil as you are...."

With respect to Jesus the New Testament writers exhibit an unrestrained effusiveness and uninhibited joy with respect to one item: we've been given a saviour. Their mood is, "Whew. At last. Just when we thought it was all over with us and our predicament was irretrievable." If

these men and women are ecstatic over the gift of the saviour, do they know something about the human predicament that we, in our age of self-assurance, have overlooked?

And then we hear Jesus announcing, as he looks detractors in the eye, “I didn’t come to call the righteous. I came to call sinners to repentance.” Repentance is a turn-around in life; it’s an about-face, a 180-degree redirection. Does Jesus Christ assume that my life is fundamentally misdirected now?

Yes. Our Lord’s diagnosis is that humankind is wrapped up in a deep-rooted revolt against God. Unbelief of the heart is wilful rebellion and repudiation, protracted defiance and disdain concerning God himself. It’s persistent ingratitude concerning God and prideful contempt as well. Our revolt issues, in God’s economy, in a human condition that is accurately described, without exaggeration, by the words ‘lost’, ‘dead’.

A diagnosis as catastrophic as this has to be met with a treatment that’s anything but superficial, or else the treatment will prove wholly ineffective. Yet in our society shallow diagnoses of the human condition abound, and we are constantly proffered superficial treatments. Shallow diagnoses always call forth shallow treatments. One treatment is greater moral earnestness; another is religiosity; another is cultural refinement; another is more government control in order to ensure social order; another is less government control in order to ensure individual responsibility. None of these treatments can remedy the human condition; they are all too shallow, according to God’s Friday.

God sees our repudiation of him (the unbelief of the heart), our brazen attempts at disguising our revolt, and our shallow attempts at remedying a predicament whose profundity we won’t acknowledge. God reacts. Of course he reacts. If God didn’t react he’d be a conscienceless psychopath. God’s reaction is his condemnation. His reaction issues in our estrangement from him. His reaction fixes a gulf between him and us, which gulf our rebellion, rejection and repudiation of him aimed at anyway, didn’t it?

Our Lord is the supreme realist. His diagnosis is correct. We are, he tells us, estranged from God by our defiant disobedience, and fixed in that estrangement by God’s just judgement.

2. Yet Good Friday is God’s Friday, remember; and God’s Friday is Good Friday. Good Friday must be good news, it has to be good news, or nothing could be good about it. Good Friday is good news, the good news of the gospel. The gospel is God-in-his-mercy coming among us who are lost and dead just because he is more distressed at our estrangement from him than we are. In his mercy God will do anything in order to set us right with himself.

Then what has he done? At the cross he has sealed his judgement upon us and manifested that judgement incontrovertibly (bad news); and at the cross he has simultaneously taken his own judgement upon himself, thereby fashioning acquittal for us. Good news.

Think of a time when you had to discipline your child for a serious offence. You had to do two things. In the first place to ensure your child understood that his behaviour was unacceptable. In the second place, you had to assure your recalcitrant child that you still loved him; that his

outrageous behaviour grieved you more than it grieved him. Every parent wrestles with this dilemma.

God wrestles with it too. And God resolves his dilemma through the cross. Through the cross he makes plain that our defiance of him and repudiation of him, so far from a slight matter, is an intolerable matter, a damnable matter. After all, our recalcitrance has cost him his Son—which is to say, has cost God himself everything, since Father and Son are one in their suffering on Good Friday.

At the same time, through the cross God declares that his mercy is without measure and without end, for he hasn't spared his Son, hasn't spared himself, all for the sake of sparing us. So it is that Paul exclaims, in limitless amazement, "God instantiates his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

The alienation from his Father that the Son undergoes on Good Friday—"the dereliction" we call it ("Why have you forsaken me?") is nothing less and nothing other than humankind's alienation from God (even though we are insensitive to it). And since, according to the Incarnation, Father and Son are one in their judgement upon us, one in their execution of that judgement, and one in the alienation that judgement entails, then the Son's alienation from the Father is simultaneously the Father's self-alienation. And the Father's self-alienation is nothing less than God, the just judge, absorbing in himself his judgement upon us, leaving us acquittal, pardon, forgiveness, life.

Think of it from another angle. In Jesus Christ, God the judge enacts his sentence of condemnation upon humankind. And then God the judge does what no human judge ever does in a court of law. He steps down from his elevated bench, stands with the offender, and imposes on himself the sentence he has just imposed on the offender, thereby absorbing in himself the sentence the offender deserves and has received and yet is now spared.

Let's return to the matter of parents disciplining children. Suppose a parent consigns a child to his bedroom for that outrageous behaviour, without supper. Some time later, the parent, upset at the child's behaviour and pained by the separation imposed on the child, unable to eat, goes to the child's room, sits with the child, and talks thing out. Then the parent, having absorbed the assigned punishment, puts an arm around the child, and the two of them walk out of the room together.

3. Together. This word brings us to the last point of the sermon. As God has absorbed his judgement upon us at the cross, he and we can live henceforth together. He can't do anything more for us than he has already done. Whether we live henceforth together now hangs on our response.

Our response will include several aspects. It will include our recognition that the diagnosis concerning us has been correct. It will include our acknowledgement that the remedy for our predicament God alone has fashioned. It will include our admission that we do not add to this cure nor do we subtract from it: either we receive it or we spurn it. Our response will include our discernment that the remedy, finally, isn't an 'it' at all but rather the effectual presence of Jesus Christ himself, and therefore we are going to embrace him gratefully or rebuff him haughtily.

Today is God's Friday. The hymn writer accurately describes the believers response, "Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to thy cross I cling."

If you are offended by the simplicity of the God's Friday message, I can only say that the gospel, finally, is simple.

If you are offended by its diagnosis of the human predicament before God, I must insist on its realism.

If you are offended by the crudeness of crucifixion and blood and bedraggled Jesus, I can only say that no one has ever been saved by genteel refinement.

Why is this Friday different from all others? Why is this Friday Good Friday? Because it's God's Friday. And by God's grace and the faith his grace enlivens within us, may it ever be yours—and mine as well.