

Passion Sunday: The Necessity of the Cross

Readings: Jeremiah 20 verses 7 onward ; Matthew 16 verses 21-28

Our gospel reading records Jesus as saying "The Son of Man must suffer". This was his commentary on his impending suffering and death. And the word "must" is very strong and forceful. It's as though Jesus was saying that it is imperative that he should suffer. There was no alternative - no way out.

But in what sense must he suffer?

I suspect most Christians would answer "Because it was the Will of God". Many would go further and say that the Cross was part of God's Plan from the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. The reason why Jesus came was to die upon the Cross for us. The Cross was pre-ordained and pre-determined.

I am uncomfortable with that. It sounds as if Jesus was just acting out a part in a drama whose script had been written in advance. He was mouthing the words and going through the actions but without any responsibility or freedom himself. Almost as though Jesus was a puppet on the stage of human history. I can't conceive of God as a Puppet Master pulling on hidden strings to control every movement and every outcome.

If that was the case then why did Jesus so often pray to God for guidance? You don't pray for guidance if you know the answer in advance or if you believe the outcome is already pre-determined.

So do we have to say that the Cross wasn't the Will of God? And if it was, then in what sense?

Can I suggest another way of looking at it?

I start from the assumption that Jesus was truly human. And like every other human being he was free to make choices and take decisions which would alter the course of events. If his freedom of choice and action was real then it rules out any pre-determined outcome. And if it wasn't real then his humanity is fatally compromised.

I also start from the position that, right at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus sorted out once and for all the method of his ministry. The temptations in the Wilderness were all about alternative ways of winning men and women for God. Jesus rejected every abuse of power and determined to win people only via the appeal of love. He would not coerce. He would not compel. He would only love them into the Kingdom. This is God's way for God is Love.

So Jesus launches into his ministry. The words that he speaks are God's words. What he does is God in action through him. And those words and those actions were controversial. He spoke the Truth and the Truth hurt. He incurred the wrath of the religious hierarchy who accused him of undermining the Faith and of blasphemy. The Romans saw him as a revolutionary threat. And so the opposition mounted. Jesus was set on a collision course with Church and State and if both sides held fast to their chosen courses then the outcome was inevitable. A collision. In the case of Jesus the point at which they collided was at the Cross. The "must" which Jesus spoke about was this inevitability.

Many years ago, when radar was still in its infancy, two ships headed in opposite directions off the coast of Newfoundland. Thick fog blanketed out all visibility. The two ships were headed on a collision course and one captain misread his radar. Both held fast the course that they had chosen and inevitably they collided with each other and there was great loss of life.

I see the Cross in those terms. It is the point at which the nature of God in Christ confronts human

nature with all its sinfulness. And human nature refused to change course. In spite of all Jesus' preaching, in spite of all his healing acts, in spite of his demonstrating what a new person and a new community would be like, people rejected him and his way. And so they plotted to do away with him. This man was dangerous. He was a danger to the religious tradition which they believed had been God-given. He was a danger to that Law of Moses on which the nation was constituted. He was a danger to the self-interest which motivates everyone of us still. Better we get rid of this dangerous man! In the words of the High Priest "it is expedient that one man should die for the nation than that the whole nation should perish."

And Jesus refused to change course. He was committed to speaking God's truth. He was committed to doing God's will in God's way which is the way of Love and nothing would deflect him from that course.

Given that human nature refused to change, and given that the Divine nature in Christ would not change there was an inevitability about what happened. The Cross was the moment and the point of impact when two opposing natures collided head-on. The Son of Man must suffer. Why? Because it was inevitable. And that inevitability persists to this day. Human nature has not changed radically. And, confronted by God and God's truth we still scorn it and reject it and crucify it all over again. Every sinful thought and action is another nail driven into the hands and feet of a Christ who is forever crucified. There has been a Cross in the heart of God from the very beginning.

But was it also the Will of God?

No, if by that you mean God planned it this way from the beginning.

But Yes if you mean that Jesus was steadfastly committed to the way of patient, persevering love which is God's way always. No doubt God could, by an overwhelming act of power, compel us into the Kingdom. But He will not. And Jesus embodied in himself the truth that God's power is power of love. Insofar as Jesus held fast to course of loving people into the Kingdom he was within the will of God. And insofar as he would not be deflected from it the Cross was also God's Will.

I am amazed and humbled that God in Christ should go to such lengths and my response is to say and sing:

"Were the whole real of nature mine

That were an offering far too small;

"Love so amazing, so divine

Demands my life, my soul, my all"