

Ann Jervis - April 7, 2019

Is. 43.16-21; Ps 126; Phil 3.4b-14; John 12:1-8

At the hardest point in my life – when my heart and world were shattered, I found Isaiah 43. We only heard part of that chapter this morning. It begins with these words: “Thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel. Do not fear, for I have redeemed you: I have called you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you: when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.”

Those years ago, in the depth of my misery, I would weep and read and weep and pray these words. Even though Isaiah presents them as God’s word to Israel, I heard them addressed right to me. Isaiah gave words and structure to what I was able to believe (thank God) even in the midst of the desolation of my life: that I was loved and valued;

that God had been created me out of love and to be loved. That I need not fear even when I felt I was drowning, even when I felt like I was walking through fire. That God would bring new life to me.

The part of the chapter we heard today speaks of God’s love and power to save; God’s loving capacity to make things new, to obliterate the former things that confined and terrified, and to open new paths of deliverance; To bring life out of misery.

All this because God has, in my slight paraphrase of Isaiah’s words, ‘formed us for Godself so that we might declare God’s praise.’

God’s love for us creates a circle of love – our love for God/our declaration of praise and joy and gratitude to God - sourced in God’s love for us. It is for this that we are made.

Out of love God made us to love God. We are created for a joyful continuum of love between us, all God’s creation and God. A perfect world would be one in which every human exists in that circle of divine love – living every moment of our lives loving God and God’s world.

But, especially in Lent, we face the truth that we live in a far from perfect world. And that we as individuals and as the church are a big part of the reason for its imperfections. The terrible facts of what the church has done to the most vulnerable shame us from the headlines. And we each know ways we have harmed others and God’s creation.

The NT writers believe that the broken circle of humanity's love for God and God's world is what God sent Jesus to mend. And that for some reason it took Jesus' death to recreate the circle.

Theologians through the centuries have proposed various reasons for why Jesus had to die. Perhaps the most famous is from the 11<sup>th</sup> century; Anselm's theory that God's justice required that a price be paid for our sins and Jesus (the only innocent one) paid that price.

There are many post-Biblical theories based on various suggestions in the writings of the NT for why Jesus died and what Jesus' death accomplished.

Spoiler alert: in this sermon I will not propose a theory of what happened between God and humanity on the cross.

Rather, I admit to you that I am okay with not knowing why God decided to send God's own son into God's world and allow him to suffer and be crucified; and that I am okay with not knowing how Jesus' torture and execution were salvific.

At the same time I want to testify to you that I do believe that the death of Christ recreated the possibility of our loving connection to God, to each other and to the creation.

Perhaps someday I will understand cognitively how this works. At this point I find just believing in a place beyond my active mind most helpful. And so, on this last Sunday before Holy Week, on this last Sunday before we will walk with Jesus towards the cross, I offer you some reflection on two Biblical passages which I think model this approach: of faith seeking closeness to but not necessarily cognitive understanding of Christ's death.

I want to reflect on the two remarkable NT passages we heard today. These passages witness to intimate experiences of simply being close to Jesus' death. They are, in the language of psychology, examples of affective rather than cognitive knowledge.

John describes a moment six days before the Passover, which, in John's gospel, means it is very close to when Jesus will be betrayed and begin his ordeal of torture and death. Jesus and some of his disciples are relaxing with Jesus' trusted friends Mary and Martha and Lazarus. A few days earlier Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. But now the close friends are just enjoying time together.

Martha is serving the meal and Lazarus is eating with Jesus. And then, seemingly out of the blue, Mary pours a jar of very expensive perfume on Jesus' feet and wipes his feet with her hair. The whole house fills up with the fragrance of the perfume. As we all know, having just heard the story, Judas is furious. Jesus on the other hand accepts Mary's extravagant action.

He recognizes that Mary has understood deeply what is going on. Mary bought the perfume because she knew Jesus was going to be buried. “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.”

Mary found a way to be close to Jesus in the most lonely and terrifying thing that Jesus would do: face and go through his death. Who would have thought of doing what she did? Only someone who loved Jesus enough to intuit what was at the heart of his life: the necessity of his torture and death.

Mary showed her love for Jesus by finding a way to be with him in his death.

Paul’s words in *Philippians* are equally remarkable. As Paul writes he is chained in a Roman prison. He is writing to people at Philippi whom he has converted – people who may be thinking that his imprisonment discounts what he has told them. Is *this* how salvation looks?

Paul presents his understanding of the truth of his situation. It looked like he had the world by the tail when he was a successful Pharisee, but when he found Jesus Christ, or rather when Jesus Christ found him, or even better put: when Paul found himself in Christ, Paul counted all his former successes as garbage.

Now all that he cares about is being found in Christ, in particular knowing the power of Christ’s resurrection while sharing in the fellowship of Christ’s suffering, being conformed to Christ’s death.

Paul’s primary and overriding desire is not that someone would come and cut his chains, or pronounce him innocent and give him a good meal. Paul’s most profound desire is entirely Christ. The focus of all of Paul is directed to loving Christ. And the desire Paul bares before his Philippian converts isn’t just for the happy ending part of loving Christ – for the resurrection.

Paul truly wants to be with Christ in all of Christ’s experiences and actions: the power of his resurrection, yes, AND the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings. Paul’s controlling desire, however, is to be made like Christ’s death. I won’t bore you with grammar, but the Greek of the words “becoming like him in his death” indicates the state in which Paul desires to live as he shares Christ’s sufferings knows the power of Christ’s resurrection.

Paul’s fundamental desire is that his life be shaped in the form of Christ’s death – for Paul, Christ’s death is the mould in which he shares Christ’s sufferings and resurrection.

Paul, like Mary, wants to be as close as possible to Christ’s death. Unlike Mary at the point we see her in John’s gospel, Paul knows that Christ didn’t stay dead. Yet, Paul’s love for Christ is so great that he wants to be joined not just to Christ’s resurrection but to the most lonely, painful and terrifying thing that Christ did.

Not just the power of Christ's resurrection but Christ's death. Even more, the power of the resurrection shaped by the form of Christ's death.

Paul more than anyone understood that Christ's cross is of a piece with Christ's resurrection: Christ's death and his being raised are one. Each defines the other. What Christ's death is, is seen only in light of the resurrection; and what Christ's resurrection is, is seen only in light of his cross.

It is entirely fitting that it is Paul who gives us the words we use in our eucharistic services. In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul writes that on the night the Lord Jesus was betrayed, he took bread and when he had given thanks he broke it – and so on. Paul says he received these words from the Lord – presumably the risen Lord. And Paul concludes his record of what the Lord told him about the last supper with this direction, “as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.”

Paul wanted more than confessional or intellectual or conceptual knowledge. He wanted truly to know Christ and to share in the action that cost Christ the most – his death.

I think Paul wanted to live in a state of becoming like Christ in his death because he loved Christ. For Paul, this means loving the risen Christ who is also the crucified Christ. Paul, chained to a wall, accepts that his life will be hard; hard but at the same time rich and full of joy – the richness and joy of love. And being with Christ in his death is at the heart of Paul's love.

There are beautiful theological interpretations of Paul which describe the cruciform life Paul advocates; which talk about concepts like participation in the drama of Christ's life, of living a cross-shaped life and so on.

I suspect, though, that the most fundamental thing for Paul was not his discovery of these suggestive explanatory concepts for Christ's death. Whatever cognitive understandings Paul came to were rooted in a deeper place - in his profound love for Christ. Because of that love, Paul wanted his whole life to be a sharing in the contours of Christ's life, especially Christ's death. Elsewhere Paul will state that he has been co-crucified with Christ. And he voices his amazement that Christ loves him and gave himself for him.

I believe the reason I could sense God's love in those hard times years ago was because of Christ's death. God's loving presence was available to me not because I was a Christian, although I was. God's love surrounded me because of Christ's crucifixion.

Along with Paul I believe that Christ's death changed reality for all humanity of whatever religion, or race or persuasion, or even in whatever time. Christ's death recreated conduits for love between humanity and God.

As we prepare to enter Holy Week next Sunday, and today as we gratefully take Christ's body and blood - one of the most marvelous ways to be close to Christ's death - I encourage us, along with Mary and Paul, to pause and wonder.

To know in that place beyond our active minds; to know that being close to Christ's death is to love Christ and that to love Christ is to be close to his death. And that in this way we participate in spreading to God's world the love of God that surrounds us all.

Can I explain how all this works? No. Do I believe it? With all my heart.