

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector  
on Good Friday (25 March 2005)  
St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina,*

Why is this day called “Good”? It’s been quite a while since I asked myself this question, largely because I think that I know the answer. Most likely you do, too. But I realize that in asking this question, I am challenged to pay closer attention to what Good Friday is about, to what it means, and most of all to what difference it makes.

Let me say at the outset that I offer these remarks to myself. By this I do not mean to be self-centered or inconsiderate of you – not in the least! Rather, what I mean is that I realize how very little we American Christians talk about the cross, how very easy it is for us to accept the cross as window dressing and not as a vibrant sign of surprising power and transformed life. Nowadays, the cross is more likely to be viewed as “bling bling” and not as a reminder of “Emmanuel: God with us.” And I, for one, am hungry for such clarity.

To underscore the need to have more clarity about the cross, I have two stories that reveal just how distant we have allowed ourselves to become from its reality and how distorted its message has become in our hands. Both stories are true.

The first one I have told many times before, but it is so brutally poignant that it bears repeating. It was told to me over twenty years ago by my dear friend in Connecticut. It goes like this.

A man went to a jewelry store in a mall, looking for a special Confirmation gift. He thought that it would be fitting if he gave a lavalier cross to the newly confirmed but was a little unsure as to what exact type and style to get. So, he sauntered up to the jewelry store counter, whereupon a young, pert saleswoman greeted him. The man explained his situation and what he was looking for and felt some immediate relief when the saleswoman said: “Oh yes, we have lots of crosses in many styles. We have crosses made from gold, silver, and pewter. We have them in wood, terra cotta, enameled clay, and even in hammered metal. But essentially, there are just two types of crosses.”

“Really?” the man replied with interest. “Yes, she said with confident expertise, “we have plain crosses and ones with little men on them.”

The second story is one I just heard this past Tuesday. It seems that a retired priest of the Diocese possesses a lovely cross of Jesus Resurrected. It is something that he has offered as a gift to one of the local churches. It is a venerable custom that a crucifix (that is, a cross with a body on it) be visible near the pulpit so as to be a detectable reminder of what St. Paul tells the Corinthians: “For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified...”

When the priest shared his intention with one of the grand dames of this particular church community, the august woman recoiled in horror and said: “Oh, I don’t like the cross. I hope you won’t do that.”

So with this in mind, these Good Friday remarks are intended to help me and, I hope help you, to embrace the cross with the respect and the awe and the hope it deserves.

So, why is this day called “Good”?

In response to this question, I focus upon three elements surround the cross and this day. They are God; sin; and suffering.

First, what does the cross have to do with God?

One way to respond to this question is to start with Christmas and the words of John’s gospel that never fail to cut through all the tinsel and wrapping paper with a staggering truth. You know what it is. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.”

This day, Good Friday, is primarily and fundamentally about God. This day is essentially about what God is like and what life with God is about. For instance, we teach our kids that “God is love.”

And this is absolutely true, but what children cannot understand, grown ups cannot avoid: namely, that real love is expensive; and the cost of love is paid for in pain.

Clearly, I am not referring to any masochistic distortions here. I am simply pointing out that to be involved in love is to come out of hiding and to be close enough to the other to risk being hurt. And this truth holds just as fast for Emmanuel: God with us, as it does for us.

The point being here is quite simple. If full life is about full love, and if this love is to be exercised in human terms – on our terms, then God in Christ takes on the cross and its pain to reveal that such pain is not the end, is not the ultimate and final word either about love or for life.

With God, there is more than this.

The cross is real. Pain is real. Death is real. Yet, what the cross shows us is death’s power need not hold us hostage like frightened sheep. Through the gift of himself, through the gift of his own Son, the Father rejects our morbid fascination and our crippling anxiety over death. It is as if God has taken a photo of life and refocused the

lens through which we see, so that the reality of death is no longer automatically at the center of the picture but God's abundant, overarching life is.

Good Friday is about God and what God is like. It is "good" because through the cross of Christ the picture of life that we see is refocused and brought into a new and revealing clarity. Death is not the center of attention. And once the lens of our life is adjusted to see death as foreground but not center, there is new life, indeed. This is God's doing. This day is about God.

But this day is also and unavoidably about "sin." The "S" word: what a can of worms it is. How often is "sin" used wrongly or like a manner? Too often, to the extent that in our time sin is on the verge of being a meaningless caricature. But sin is real. Sin speaks to the status of our relationship with God. In its essence, sin is not a moral matter, that is, not a matter of doing right or wrong. It is a term that refers to our relationship to God and with God. In those times and circumstances when we turn our backs on God as "the source of light and life," we separate ourselves from our source; and like a lovely rose blossom that is snipped, we wither and die because we are separate from our roots.

At its essence, sin is about separation – from God, from our truest selves, and from God's truth that is reflected in the lives of our neighbors. We have been made in God's image. We have been called to be God's partners in creation, but we have wanted to usurp the partnership and be in charge. As a result, we have alienated ourselves from God and, thereby, distorted creation – including ourselves. We wither, and withering causes fear and produces pain.

Yet, the cross of Christ on Good Friday speaks to this separation and to the will of God. And the simplest way I know of expressing the will of God is best done visually in terms of an opened-armed embrace. God stands in front of us, arms open to welcome us home; and perfect love waits and waits and waits – even unto death – on a cross – with extended arms. God refuses the separation. For God, this is both the cost and the proclamation of the cross.

Lastly, Good Friday and the cross speak to the issue of suffering. I have a great need to be very careful about what I say here. For it is surely much easier to talk this talk than it is to walk this walk. As the language of this benevolent Friday mentions over and over again that this way of the cross is just that: a way, not a talk. So, I tremble at the prospect of ushering words that must be lived, especially by me and those I love most, and especially when suffering is the topic. But undeniably this day and the cross are also about suffering and what can be seen of God in the pain.

Martin Luther has pointed out that Christians are to be joyful people. We are not to go around waiting for the other shoe to drop; nor are we to engage in a pseudo-spirituality that sees every hardship as a matter of the cross. (Ruining your manicure has nothing to do with the cross.) Rather, Luther says that we are to be joyful because when we are to bear the cross, it will be the real deal; and at that time we will need to remember what is happening in the midst of our suffering so as not to be overcome and to lose our way.

Suffering seems to be un-American. On the one hand, we do not have to go looking for suffering. Again as Luther indicates, it will find us. So, mature faith and a healthy spirit will not engage in self-flagellation or other forms of masochism. Yet on the other hand, in our culture, the implicit ethic is not only that suffering is to be avoided, virtually at all costs; but also that suffering is fundamentally unnecessary and always a bad thing. In its extreme cultural form, there is no need to feel any pain, at any time, under any circumstance. Moreover, pain means that we are doing something wrong. We are a failure.

No wonder we are a culture awash in addiction and the painful confusion that addicted thinking and expectation produce. While we are not to look for pain and suffering as a false sign of our faithfulness, neither are we to avoid them because pain has its purpose, even the pain of death.

This Friday is “good” in that it asks us to mature. It asks us to be open to growth, especially in the face of fear and death. Whereas our culture says reduce pain – by all means; the cross invites us to an alternative response, to an alternative question. The question is this: Is this pain labor pain – the sign of birth and new life; or does its presence in my life simply cause me to panic and run with anxiety, adding impetus to chronic fear? Does our fear of pain and suffering keep us in bondage? Or do we have a way that leads us beyond their grip and into new life?

In St. John’s rendition of the crucifixion, Jesus is viewed quite differently than from the other three accounts. The Jesus in Mark and Matthew conveys a “suffering servant” who trusts even in the throes of abandonment and death. Luke’s Jesus forgives in the midst of excruciating pain; but John’s Jesus encounters the cross, knowing that through the cross God is uniquely unveiling a reality that has been emerging since the dawn of time, itself. The cross in the Fourth Gospel is a template for the world to apply to its life so that it may have life and have it abundantly – no matter what.

And so when the crucified Jesus in John bows his head and utters his last words – “It is finished.” this is not said in despair or resignation. It is a fact. God’s will has been done, and nothing (including death) will ever be the same again. The way has been manifest. The secret is out. There is more, and Jesus has shown the way ahead.

“It is finished.” And this is the reason that this day, in addition to being a very hard day, is also a “good” day. It is about God, whose love for us is stronger than fear and death – now and always. Amen.