

A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector,  
St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina,  
on Good Friday (14 April 2006)

This is a complex and demanding day. Truth to tell, we don't like it very much and with good reason. Good Friday and the events that surround it reveal humanity at our worst. Everything about this day is dark and painful, and who needs more of that?

Good Friday is steeped in the things that we instinctively turn away from it. Today is hard, and every fiber in our body recoils from it. We recoil because Good Friday reminds us too well of the frightening truth: That when you get down to it, the elements contained in this day are what makes the world go round.

Good Friday showcases all that makes life unbearable: the suffering, pain, rejection, selfishness, cruelty, abandonment, fear, and death. Who can be blamed for avoiding this day?

I am reminded of the line from T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* that puts it bluntly: "Humanity can not bear much

reality." Good Friday is one of those times that proves the point.

Yet, irrespective of this, preaching on this day cannot avoid testifying to humanity's darker, unredeemed nature. There must be no dodging of the fact that we are in need of redemption. There can be no toleration of any attempts to distance ourselves from the ghastly incompleteness that the cross reveals. We certainly cannot be allowed the emotional luxury of seeing the cross's narrative in terms of "us" and "them." "They did it to Jesus!" as if we somehow in our nice, suburban enclaves, with our overly sensitized feelings and insatiable need to be comforted, can relieve ourselves of any part in this betrayal of God.

Such thinking is not only dangerously deluded and speaks of intolerable denial; such thinking harbors the very evil that perpetrated Christ's crucifixion in the first place.

Flannery O'Connor, born in segregated Georgia in the mid-1920's as a white Roman Catholic, had a knack for capturing in her writing both humanity's need for redemption and our blindness to that need. In her short story, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," her main character portrays this type of denial - call it nihilism, where there is no meaning in life other than one's own terror and one's capacity for destruction. Her character, called the "misfit," says this:

"Jesus has thrown everything off balance. His resurrection is a lie, which means that there's nothing for a person to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left, the best way you can - by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. There's no pleasure but meanness."

Sounds al too familiar, doesn't it? Isn't that what those Alabama college students said about their burning of those churches this past summer? How else does one explain the raping of the women of Darfur and the world's silence? At the cross on Golgotha, how many

were watching Jesus die just for the hell of it?

Good Friday reveals humanity at our worst, and it can be too much to bear. Nonetheless, we live in a Good Friday world. Every newscast says as much, to the extent that we have adjusted our spiritual, emotional, and moral compasses to read "normal" in the face of it all. Yet, without abetting any denial, this day demands that we also look at God. For this Friday is still called "Good."

It was Athens' own Socrates who, four centuries prior to Jesus, uttered these telling words: "A really righteous person would be so unacceptable to human society the he would be subjected to every humiliation and crucified." [Henry Chadwick, History of Christianity, page 21] And, indeed, that is what human society did, when the righteous one emerged. This is to say that what this day is essentially about is the revealing of the character of our God. And the character of our God is steadfast, life-giving.

Why did Jesus have to die? It is a question that we are less and less willing to ask nowadays. Perhaps it is because the

canned answer is "for our sins." But the problem with that answer is, in addition to the fact that we have ruined the word "sin," that Jesus died first and foremost so that we could see what our God is like and what life with God is like. The essential point of this day is that our God will not -- our God does not -- run away from us or from the incompleteness of the world.

Christianity is the only world religion that takes suffering and evil seriously. Christianity knows that suffering and evil need redemption. And the hope of redemption entails life that is not held hostage by the desperate power inherent in suffering and evil.

Mature Christianity does not regard suffering and evil as elements of unreality or aspects of an all-too-material life that need to be left behind. Good Friday stands as proof of this because in the cross, God's Christ confronts the absolute worst the world has to offer. God's Christ enters fully into the incompleteness.

When Jesus sweats blood in the garden, when he cries out on the cross, it is a testimony to the

reality of suffering and evil. And God does not dodge this reality. God confronts it.

Good Friday is the world's day, where the powers of death do their worst. And it is awful because it is terribly real. This day is draped in black for good reason. Life is lost. Hearts are broken. Dreams are shattered. Incompleteness reigns. But there is more than this because this day is also about our God.

Yet, we cannot, we must not rush too quickly past what we now see in the cross.

Author and recovering flower child, Anne Lamott has confessed to wanting to rush past all this. Speaking for a lot of us, she writes: I don't have the right personality for Good Friday, for the crucifixion...I'd like to skip ahead to the resurrection vision of one of the kids in our Sunday School, who drew a picture of the Easter Bunny outside an open tomb: everlasting life and a basket of chocolates..."

But if we ignore this day, we can never appreciate the magnitude of that open tomb; nor can we even begin to absorb what the sweetness of the

chocolate indicates. In this, I have long-appreciated the line in the Apostles' Creed that says that Jesus "descended to the dead." The phrasing of the 1928 Prayer Book pulls no punches: "He descended into hell."

The character of our God and the significance of this day are revealed on this occasion. This Friday is "Good" because the presence of God stands smack in the middle of all the incompleteness, even to the place of nothingness. And that makes all the difference. That's what makes an empty tomb profound and the chocolate redemptively sweet. And that is the reason this day is "Good" - but for now, it is also oh-so-hard.

Blessed be our God. Amen.