

April 10, 2009

Good Friday, Evening Service (John 19)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd Noelle York-Simmons, associate rector

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Oh sometimes it causes me to tremble.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Last Sunday, many of us sat here near tears after the reading of the Passion while Katy Ulrich sang this old spiritual. The words aren't particularly profound by themselves, a simple question, really, but I know from the reactions of many of you afterwards that they hit hard. Katy's glorious voice, to be sure, added to the moving experience of this song on Palm Sunday, but the question is haunting, nonetheless.

We weren't there when they crucified Jesus. We weren't there when Pilate, fearing the crowd and his own popularity, handed him over. We weren't there when the frenzied mob began to shout "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

And no, we weren't there when they finally nailed him down and hoisted him up to die out in the elements, with the sun and the bugs, the sweat and the taunting. We know the story, but we weren't there.

When we think about this story, there are many places where we can try to put ourselves, in the crowd, with the women standing nearby. We can be mocking, or weeping, or dividing the clothes or holding the spear.

But we are not hanging. Only Jesus is hanging, the God-man, on display for everyone to witness. It seems he has failed. And now he hangs, alone, beaten and dying.

Several weeks ago, when recapping his trip to Ecuador, John mentioned in a sermon that he found them to be a "Good Friday people." That the people of Ecuador, a largely Catholic and Pentecostal country, celebrate Good Friday with more excitement and devotion than they do Easter. It is my understanding that this is not at all uncommon in countries that are economically depressed or mired in conflict and war.

My first reaction when I hear about "Good Friday people" is to think that it is such a shame that they can't make the theological jump to Easter like we do.

That if only they could come out of the depression and death that is Good Friday, they could see the promise that is the resurrection and be changed.

Because that is where I am. I want to believe in the story of Jesus without the death part. I want a story so powerful, so compelling, so life-giving, so love-affirming but that doesn't include the death of the central character. It is very Pollyanna of me. I want my theological cake and to eat it, too.

I don't like the idea of death as God's tool for salvation. I don't want it to be necessary. I don't want to skip the meaning, but I do want to skip the blood. I am Easter people. I'm happy like that.

Good Friday people, however, come to the cross from a different place, a place far removed from mine. And it is a place that I am beginning to understand as central to the Gospel.

Face to face with Good Friday and the people who need it, I'm beginning to understand Good Friday from another perspective.

Good Friday is a day when those who are suffering enter into the mystery that God is suffering with them.

God knows the suffering of the poor, of the refugees and the displaced, of those who live in fear, of those who are vulnerable to economic, political, and military forces beyond their control. God knows the suffering of the hungry and the outcast. God knows the grief of the grieving, the pain of betrayal.

God knows loneliness. God knows abandonment.

God knows it all personally and profoundly, because God suffered it all in the person of Jesus.

And Good Friday is the day when those who feel this suffering, those who share this pain can know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that they are not alone.

Many of us Easter people need Good Friday to remind us that God loved us so much, so completely, so deeply, that God would give that which was most precious, life, in order to promise us life eternal. Many of us Easter people need the death to be reminded of how evil humankind can really be and how remarkable the resurrection really is.

But Good Friday people need Good Friday in order to remember that they are never alone in their grief and suffering, that they are accompanied by a God who has been there. This message proves to me that the occupied cross, the one I'd like to forget, is equally as powerful as the empty cross, the one I choose to embrace.

So while no, we weren't there on that day of crucifixion. We weren't there when they tried, beat, mocked, nailed and hung him. But we are here for the persecutions that go on every day, in our neighborhoods, our country, our world. There are Good Friday people all around us, suffering their own pain, humiliation, degradation, finding comfort in a Messiah who has done the same.

We need Easter so that we never stay there, mired in that suffering. We need the promise of the empty cross that tells us, beyond a shadow of a doubt that suffering never has the last word. But we need the promise of Good Friday, too, for ourselves and for those whose lives are defined by that suffering. This day reminds us that in the shadow of the cross, we and they are not alone.