

Pentecost 18B, September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2018

Readings: Proverbs 31:10-31, Psalm 1, James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a, Mark 9:3-37

## “Bringing People down from Their Crosses”

### Introduction

Our community prayer this morning was unusual, a little weird. It was weird because it looked at colour through the eyes of the blind. What we perceived was the way in which colour is heard, “brown crunches under the feet like autumn leaves”: colour is tasted, “yellow tastes like mustard”, “red is sour like unripe strawberries”, and colour is emotionally experienced: “black is the king of all colours”; and why...because it is “as soft as silk, when mum hugs me, when her hair falls into my face”. In this story, we hear how colour is experienced, how colour is received, how colour is interpreted, how colour is mentally and emotionally represented. What we can conclude from this is that colours are never just one thing: rather colours carry multiple meanings, depending upon the lenses through which we encounter them. But this is not just the case with colour; in fact, it applies to everything. When we experience things, we don't just receive them as they are: we also project our own understanding upon them. We receive the thing, of course, but in the same breath we interpret the thing that we receive: it is a two-way process.

I want to use this idea, of experience as made up of *receiving* and *interpreting*, to examine our understanding of the cross. Last week, today and for the next few weeks, the cross stands centre ground in our readings. But what we find in those readings, is that the cross means different things in different situations: in Mark's Gospel, the cross has a different meaning to the cross in the Book of James. And, if we were to explore Paul's writings, we would find a different interpretation again. It is not that these interpretations are at odds with each other, but they do offer different shades of meaning. In other words, the New Testament church communities, all received the cross as part of the faith, but offered different ways of understanding it. But if there are variances of interpretation of the cross within the New Testament, there have also been differences in meaning through the whole life of the Christian Church.

Let's then think for a minute about the cross and how it has been interpreted in say the last 100 years and then what changes have occurred in say the last twenty. In doing this, we will find our way back to the Gospel reading for today from Mark. I want to do this in a very personal way, explaining my own journey.

### The Cross in the Last Century

I began my Christian life quite early: as a child, when I experienced conversion to Christ. In those early years, the cross spoke to me of my salvation: in the cross I heard and I experienced forgiveness and a sense of personal freedom. As I grew older into adolescence, this interpretation of the cross as the expression of God's generosity to me, remained: it was a very intimate experience. The words of one of the hymns of my childhood said it all

*He has our salvation wrought  
he our captive souls has bought  
he has reconciled us to God,  
he has washed us in his blood*

This is I think pretty much how Christians have interpreted the cross: an act of God's grace to us. And the reason why we have interpreted the cross that way, is because it is basic to the Church's teaching. The cross *does* speak to us of God for us (*pro-nobis*): this is implicit in Scripture and is explicit in the teachings offered by among others, such figures as St Augustine and St Anselm.

## The last Twenty Years

But this is not the end of the story, for the cross assumes other nuances, other shades. So, let's us turn to more recent developments.

Upon being sent by the Uniting Church to Latin America, I began to see how the cross was interpreted differently. While for me, the cross spoke of personal salvation, for the people with whom I worked, the cross also spoke of reality. Rather than seeing the cross in spiritual/mystical and perhaps even romantic terms; for those who knew what it meant to be impoverished, discriminated against and the victims of state violence, under military dictatorships, the cross was not just a noun, but was associated with the verb "to crucify and to be crucified". The cross served as the theological symbol through which Christians woke up to the realities which they suffered, to the oppression of which they were victims. But there was something else here as well: not only did the cross wake them up to their own experience of being crucified, it also awakened them to the insight that God in Christ was a victim like them. Rather than escaping reality, hiding in their chapels and churches, the cross which spoke of God as victim and alerted them to their own situation as victims, led to them taking life into their own hands, becoming active subjects not just passive objects.

## The Gospel of Mark

And what Gospel was it that awakened these people to their situation? It was the Gospel of Mark. It was in Mark, that these people understood that God is the victim, not the victor, that God is the victim not the hangman.

And what reading do you think was their favourite, their preferred? It was this reading today, where Jesus gathers (holds) the children. These people – well versed in their bible studies – were well aware of the way in which children in antiquity were often 'crucified', brutalized – domestically, economically, socially and sexually. They had seen it in their own suburbs. These people – well versed in their bible studies – understood that genuine greatness rested in embracing the 'victim God' through holding and protecting the 'victim child'. They did it daily and weekly as they faced-down abusive people and systems.

**The cross is not just about our personal salvation. Yes, it speaks to us of God's grace and *our* salvation. It equally speaks of God the victim, God the crucified.** It pleads with us to comprehend the divine invitation: that God be the *final victim*, the divine invitation that there be *no more victims!* As we confront another year of state sponsored child abuse on Nauru, despite recent calls by the AMA (Australian Medical Association), I wonder when we will finally bring these children down from their crosses, and what the politicians will make of today's Gospel reading...if they are in church.