

A Meditation

Holy Friday is the starkest of liturgies: a moment in time when we experience the bald humanity of God, the humanity of God at its most stark, at its most confronting.

Becoming Human: “Free For” not just “Free From”

We often think about Holy Friday as the event when God dies for us, in order to liberate us from ourselves, so that we may become divine: hence the Taizé meditation you have just heard:

Per crucem et passionem tuam

Libera nos Domine, Libera nos Domine Libera nos Domine, Domine

By your cross and passion

Deliver us Lord, Liberate us Lord, Deliver us Lord, Lord

But there is more to Holy Friday and to the Christian faith than God liberating, freeing, delivering us *from* ourselves in the historical and metaphysical event of the Cross. I would like to put to you that Holy Friday – the day when God reveals himself to be so utterly, and vulnerably human – is the day when we actually learn what it means to be human, what becoming human looks like. In other words, Good Friday, is not just about being liberated *from ourselves*, from a broken human condition, but equally, is about being liberated *for ourselves*, for a humanness which is a project, an adventure in the making. One of the most important pieces I have ever read, is a little book called “Poverty of Spirit” by the German Catholic theologian, Johann Baptist Metz. In speaking of the vocation of becoming human he writes this:

Becoming a human being involves more than conception and birth. It is a mandate and a mission, a command and a decision. We each have an open-ended relationship to ourselves...Being is entrusted to us as a summons, which we are each to accept and consciously acknowledge. We are never simply a being that is ‘there’ and ‘ready-made’, just for the asking. From the very start, we are something that can Be, a being who must win self-hood and decide what it is to be.

So, learning to become human, winning selfhood, coming to an understanding, an accurate understanding of what it means to be, is a challenging, difficult task. But again, as I suggested earlier, Holy Friday helps us along the way, because in that event as no other, God shows, demonstrates, to us, what being human ultimately involves: it is this, a sort of vulnerability – living exposed, living

susceptibly, living – should I say it – unsafely. To live this way is difficult, because all our instincts, fed from our natural anxiety about ourselves, tell us to live in the opposite manner: from strength, from resourcefulness, independently, self-sufficiently.

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Paul's Idea of "Self-Emptying" and What This means for Living in the World

This insight about life as a vocation in learning to become human, in learning to become vulnerable, is something that the apostle Paul embraces with a particular term he uses: "*kenosis*", meaning "self-emptying". For Paul to take up the challenge of becoming genuinely human, is to surrender the anxiety of our *hubris*, and it involves two things: first, a certain spirituality which understands that I am not the centre of everything; and second, a particular ethics, which is grounded in integrity and civility. In other words, in becoming human through Christ, we are freed *from* our narcissism and freed for vulnerability *for* others, *for* the community, *for* society, *for* the world.

Today: The Existential and Political World

Some little time ago, Yale Law professor Stephen Carter wrote two books. The first, published in 1996 was entitled "Integrity". It is a so-called 'pre-political' book – a book exploring the elements of good character, irrespective of which side of politics you find yourself. Integrity is the virtue that helps us understand what is right and to do it, irrespective of the cost. As Carter says, if someone has no integrity, there's no point in asking them what they stand for. Two years later, he published his second book, this time entitled, "Civility". If integrity creates ethical individuals, civility creates ethical communities. Civility, Carter suggests, is what is needed to protect freedom: both yours and mine.

In many people's minds, civility is just good manners. Manners form a part of civility, but civility is much more than that: it is more than just tolerance – today's by-word – it includes, it embraces, respect and kindness. The opposite of civility is barbarism and it's only when we see this, that we realise the path we embark on if we lose all traces of civility. Nor does civility mean that we should always agree with one another; rather, it is exactly in the way we disagree that we show our civility or the lack thereof.

Holy Friday speaks to us of a God who imparts his own vulnerability to us as a model for becoming genuinely human. Holy Friday, reflects the apostle Paul's

thought – the one who perhaps best of all understood the mind of Jesus – that becoming human is about self-emptying – jettisoning our *hubris* that ties us up in knots, both spiritually and ethically. In our Covid-19 world, Holy Friday, speaks to us of a God whose insistence upon vulnerability finds its expression in integrity and civility, as we learn to live together in new ways.

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