

Sermon preached by Rev Laurel Barr at Roseville Uniting Church on 29th March 2009

A very public and violent execution - Is it really God's intent?

Readings: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 5:5-10

When my husband John, my father-in-law and I returned from the Gold Coast to be greeted by our daughter after attending a very happy family wedding last Sunday, Sydney Domestic Airport was bustling with people doing similar things. But less than half an hour after we had left the airport for Roseville a horrific brawl between rival bikie groups erupted - and in full view of terrified and shocked onlookers a man was brutally bludgeoned to death. The metal posts which mark the queues for passengers booking in became murder weapons.

Passengers and relatives and friends and airport staff found themselves witnesses to terrifying and deadly violence. Those who tried to get away from it and find safe cover found that the rolling brawl followed them as heavily built angry men swept them aside with no regard for any person's safety. It was a very public and violent execution in a very public place... and it left deeply shocked and traumatized people in its wake.

And as we come closer to the events of Good Friday and Easter we are confronted by another very public and violent execution. For at the centre of the Christian faith the public execution of Jesus is a horrific and violent act: Crucifixion as a means of execution was deliberately designed to inflict maximum suffering and humiliation for those condemned to die this way(1). It was the way that the Roman instilled upon its citizens the consequences of any dissension. The symbol of the cross represents a truly horrible business and the Gospels remind us of just how traumatized and terrified Jesus' followers were.

And it raises questions for me - Was God somehow involved in all this violence? Did God really will that his Son suffer and be killed in the midst of such violence? If so, what kind of a God is God?

You will remember Mel Gibson's controversial film *The Passion of the Christ*. It is interesting that in 2005 Mel Gibson released another edited toned-down version. Gibson said the idea was to soften the graphic violence of the original film so that people could take their "Aunt Martha and Uncle Harry" to see it. But Thomas G. Long a theologian in an article for *the Christian Century* (2) suspects that there were other

factors besides Aunt Martha and Uncle Harry's squeamishness at the raw violence that were responsible for these changes made by Mel Gibson.

One woman who saw the original film said "I left the theatre feeling sick. What sort of God would let that kind of violence happen to his own son? I guess I was supposed to be moved by the sacrifice of Jesus; instead I was repulsed by the violence and the idea of a God who would will such a thing."

While many who saw the film were deeply moved by the loving sacrifice of Jesus - it raised confronting questions for many others. They began to question the very goodness of God.

The thing is that at the heart of Mel Gibson's film is the idea that Jesus suffered to appease the righteous anger of God. Does God really demand the violent sacrifice of his sinless and perfect Son to appease his honour and righteous anger because of humanity's sin and disobedience of his Law?

Is God really constantly looking to be compensated? Can we trust such a God even if in Jesus Christ's death the debt has been paid? I believe that there is something quite troubling here. It opens the door to the idea that God punishes and uses violence - that the bad things that happen to us are punishments for what we may have done.

As we ponder these questions I believe that the readings from Jeremiah and the Letter to the Hebrews can help us.

For generations of ancient Israelites there had been a pattern about their relationship with God. God had made a covenant with Moses and their ancestors at Mount Sinai. In that covenant the God who had wonderfully liberated the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and provided for them in the wilderness, had called them to be God's people through the giving of the ten commandments written on stone.

The people's part of the covenant was to accept them and to promise to obey them. But over and over again they had failed to keep them and so we read that they were judged and punished until they turned back to God and were forgiven- the relationship was restored only for the pattern to repeat itself.

But the prophet Jeremiah spoke of a different way. Jeremiah was writing at a time when thousands of his people were deported to Babylon after a huge military defeat at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian army.

Gone was their land, their king, their Temple - all the things that had come to them on the promises of God. It was a time of deep grieving and loss and soul-searching - everything was hopeless and many of the people believed that God had abandoned them - certainly they believed that God was punishing them. (3)

But in the midst of that exile experience Jeremiah uses the images of God as a faithful loving husband with the Israelites as his wife and God as a loving but frustrated parent - I am sure many of us as parents can remember times when our children have pushed all our buttons and taken us to the limit - we have been very angry and then suddenly we hold back as we remember how much we love our children and how precious our relationship is. This is the God that Jeremiah knows.

In Jeremiah's prophecy to the people unable to keep their side of the covenant, God does something radically new - Jeremiah says God will write his laws not on stone tablets out there as he did on Sinai but God will write his laws deep inside the people - in fact he will write the law on their hearts. Now for the Israelites the heart represented their innermost being - it was their will and their mind. And so God in this new relationship is about renewing and transforming and changing people from the inside out. The law - God's life-giving ways designed to build people into community - would no longer be a set of external rules - it would become a part of their very being as everything is made new by God's forgiveness and grace.

This God that Jeremiah speaks of then is not a cold detached God demanding his pound of flesh as compensation when the people disobey his ways but rather God of the heart - God who, yes, calls us into obedience and names our guilt when we mess up but who like a loving parent hurts deeply when we turn away from him - a compassionate God who feels intensely when we suffer - and a God who acts not only to keep his side of the bargain but who acts to do our side of the bargain as well in order to restore us into relationship with himself.

You see what is truly radical in this new covenant is that Jeremiah speaks of God restoring relationship **unconditionally**. Through the prophet Jeremiah we encounter God's grace and unconditional love for his people even though in Jeremiah was not clear how and when this promise would happen.

But what about Jesus' suffering and his violent and very public death in the face of this forgiving God of love? In the Letter to the Hebrews the writer says that God only desires one thing - a fully human life, an authentic life well lived - and Jesus the Son of God lived that authentic life. (1)

In the verses (Hebrews 4:15) just before the Hebrews passage we heard today, we read that Jesus the Son of God has walked the same paths as we walk - Jesus experienced the same temptations that we daily face, he endured the same problems and difficulties and afflictions as we do. Jesus experienced all that we do as human beings but he never once compromised his humanity - he was always fully alive to God and lived as God had always intended for us to be - in his obedient life we see the will of God.

The problem is that the truth that Jesus lived - what he did and said and who he was confronted people. Jesus' selfless love and healing and teaching and forgiveness and acceptance of those

rejected by others showed up the selfishness and cruelty and corruptness of others especially the religious and political leaders. It threatened those in power and they had nowhere to hide.

As Thomas Long (1) puts it, "the pain and the violence were already out there.... they had been there since the blood of Abel soaked the earth and cried out for vengeance. No one can walk this human path in faith and obedience without encountering suffering. In the midst of that suffering Jesus cried out with tears, not for revenge and not in hate, but with prayers and supplications...and to be the one who is able to save."

The truth of God's love and acceptance and justice and peace threatens people - I am old enough to remember how when Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement in the United States of America marched for justice it exposed the racism and discrimination in the heart of that nation and those who were exposed had nowhere to go but to bomb their churches and try to silence them. We see it too in the hostile and often vicious reaction to whistle-blowers in our workplaces. There is nothing so powerful and provocative as the truth!

By sharing our humanity and living a truly authentic human life Jesus showed us what God is really like and what God really desires for us - but in doing so Jesus made himself very vulnerable. With the love of God inscribed indelibly on his heart and with incredible courage Jesus did not step back and when those he exposed had nowhere to hide, they killed him.

I believe that pain and violence is not God's will - it is the very opposite to everything Jesus ever revealed to us about God: Violence is the result of people's inability to deal with the truth and to live lives of authenticity, trust and commitment to each other. Violence shows no respect for the other.

But God - God is the God of relationship and the God of abundant living - God is about health and wholeness for everyone as Jesus showed in his ministry. One of the Church Fathers Irenaeus (in 1) said "**The glory of God is humanity fully alive**".

Friends the new covenant of the heart based upon God's unconditional forgiveness and Jesus' authentic life lived with determined love in the face of opposition transforms the cross a public symbol of fear and violent execution into an equally public symbol of unconditional love and integrity and eternal life.

Jesus was killed cruelly and publically without mercy by his enemies - he truly suffered but with his arms outstretched to embrace and forgive even his executors, Jesus the Son of the living God repudiated evil and violence and vengeance - He did it for humanity - for you and for me.

When Jesus the Son suffered and died, the heart of God the Father was torn in grief at what his people had come to - yet through the power of the Spirit Jesus was raised to life. Violence and death did not have the last word.

Sources

- (1) Peter Butler, *With Love to the World* Vol. 12 No.6, P.33
- (2) Thomas G. Long "What God Wants" in *The Christian Century* March 21 2006 p.19, www.religion-online.org
- (3) Rev Dr Charles Biggs, "A New Covenant" -article in *Seasons of the Spirit, Congregational Life Lent-Easter 2009*, p.69
- (4) Howard Wallace, "Year B: Lent 5 March 29, 2009: Jeremiah 31:31-34" Commentary hwallace.unitingchurch.org.au
- (5) Anna Grant -Henderson www.oldtestamentlectionary.unitingchurch.org.au/2009/March/Lent5Jer31_09.html
- (6) Luke T. Johnson "The Letter to the Hebrews" in *The Writings of the New Testament*, 1986, Fortress Press., Chapter 20