

Sermon on Luke 23 Good Friday 2016 – ‘The Great Commendation’¹

It is one of the great privileges of ministry to be able to commend people into the hands of God on behalf of the church.

During the funeral service, once everything else is done you stand in close proximity to the body.

And you pray, O God of eternal light, we now commend our brother, our sister in faith, into your hands.

May they know the light of your presence, and then a little further on... in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Saying those words regularly moves me close to the point of tears.

In that moment, at that holy time, those few exacting phrases plumb the depths of all that it means to be Christian.

We affirm the preciousness of a life.

This particular life.

This child of God, in the eyes of God.

We affirm the nearness of God in all things, especially in death, the part of human existence which is most feared and in which we imagine ourselves to be most alone.

And most importantly we affirm that death does not have the last word.

It is rather in faith and hope that we survey the wondrous cross.

¹ The theme of ‘commendation’ as a reflection of Jesus’ words from the cross in Luke 23 comes from Barbara Brown-Taylor’s sermon, ‘The Commendation’. Found in *Home By Another Way*, Cowley, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Maryland USA, p94.

Faith that in resurrection, through our Lord Jesus, who has walked the path of mortality before us, like him, we should become immortal.

And take our place in God's new creation in the final time within the great communion of saints.

Ministers do this on behalf of the community of faith.

The minister says the words, but it is the community of the faithful praying, commending, hoping, loving, believing, together.

In Luke's Jesus we find no cries of desolation from the cross, but rather a prayer on the lips of the Saviour.

It's a prayer which comes from the Psalms, the great hymnal of Israel.

And it was one which Jewish mothers would teach their children as they went to sleep each night.

It's the ancient equivalent of a prayer perhaps many of our mothers taught us at night time, 'Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray thee Lord my soul to keep... '.

Night had fallen on Jesus this day too.

'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.', Jesus says.

Psalm 31:5.

Jesus has no officiant, no minister at his funeral.

His community of faith, the little band of disciples, has scattered.

He is alone in the world.

And so he is left to commend himself to God as he breathes his last.

His heavenly Father is the only one in close proximity to him at his death.

And Luke wants us to see that this deep and abiding relationship is not broken by the cross.

Rather it is the sign par excellence of the sacrificial love which characterises God's own nature.

Jesus dies into his heavenly father's arms as a child lays down to sleep at night.

Now I lay me down to sleep...into your hands I commit my spirit.

All of this is ironic of course given that it is a charge of blasphemy that has condemned him.

Jesus commends himself into the hands of the God he is supposed to have insulted with every word he spoke.

It would be like asking for a job from the shop owner you just stole your daily bread from.

Not a good look.

The Pharisees with the aid of a compliant Pilate believe they're representing the truth with this charge.

They think they're controlling the narrative, the meaning of the events happening before them.

Jesus of Nazareth was a seditious Galilean prophet who got too big for his boots according to them (the north was always a problem).

He pushed his idolatrous claims too far.

Exalted himself too much.

And so had to be done away with.

How dare he usurp the prerogative of God!

Blasphemy!, they cry.

Jesus was a danger to the powerbrokers of organised religion and that was never going to end well.

So with the conspiring of the Romans they have him sentenced to death.

Yet while the forces that saw him crucified were telling this story, their version of events, Jesus tells his own.

The same story he had been telling all along.

There he was on the cross, still bringing the lost and lonely into the Kingdom.

And when he comes to the end, having assured the repentant criminal, with nowhere left to turn, no-one left to assure, he hands his own life over to God.

As one commentator writes, 'By saying what he did, he took himself out of their hands. By commending himself to the God whose enemy they said he was, he redefined what was happening to him.'

They thought his life, his ultimate destiny, was in their hands.

That they were in control.

Jesus saw it differently.

As he always had, even bearing a criminal's death, he still belonged to his Father in heaven.

And no earthly collusions were going to change that fact.

It was in Jesus' complete surrender to the powers that be, that he rendered them powerless.

In his complete letting go of any control, that he took control of the situation.

It was not for them to define him, however hard they tried.

The truth remained the truth, grace remained grace, love remained love, God remained God, whatever the religious leaders said.

In Jesus' final prayer from the cross, the final letting go, the great commendation, he tells the alternate story of his life, and of God's, and of ours.

Good Friday is not something from a far off time and place that has nothing to do with us.

It's not something to be admired like an ornamental vase on a mantelpiece.

Each of the Gospel writers assumes that this death, this strange and troubling set of events, indeed has everything to do with us.

'These things are written', writes John the evangelist, 'that you may believe Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.'

Like the minister at the funeral, at Jesus' death, as at his birth, God stands in close proximity to us.

Those who followed Jesus may have stood at a distance as he was crucified, but God refused to stand at a distance from his creation.

Refused, even, to stand at a distance from death.

This has something to do with you God is saying, so you better be paying attention.

The world is a fearful place at the moment and at base it all stems from the deep and consistent human fear of death, of pain, of suffering.

Terrorism is aptly named as it is designed to create the maximum amount of fear and terror possible for the human heart and human society.

Fear of the same fate befalling me, we think.

And then fear of those who might do it to me.

And then fear of interacting with those I don't know.

And then fear of interacting with others at all.

Until finally there's just me, alone in my bed with no relationship at all for fear of getting hurt.

Except even there, the knowledge that one day my time will come makes me afraid too.

So I can't escape it.

It doesn't have to be so dramatic of course.

Often we're just fearful of what others think of us.

Fearful of looking foolish or saying the wrong thing.

Perhaps we're even fearful of God sometimes too.

We see our own sin and shame, the times we hurt others or act unkindly, the generally fractured nature of our existence, and wonder how God could ever forgive us.

Fear creeps up on us like a burglar ready to steal our most prized belongings.

For that's exactly what fear does, it makes us feel like we don't belong.

Like we are alone and have nowhere to turn.

Frightened of whatever and whomever might be out there ready to hurt us, so self protection at all costs becomes the order of the day.

Distrust, suspicion.

And it's precisely at that moment, that moment when our fear has driven us to the sense of complete abandonment, that Jesus comes and stands next to us.

God in close proximity.

For Jesus suffers and endures through that which we most fear in order to make us free from it.

And death loses all its power.

On Good Friday God stares death down, in order to lift us up, out of fear, and into abundant life.

As it turns out, as Jesus commends himself into God's hands, so he commends us all.

'Sin and death and hell shall never, o'er us final triumph gain.', wrote Timothy Rees.

Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.

We are rescued from fear, from sin, from death, from believing the worst version of events, the worst version of ourselves, the worst version of the world, maybe even the worst version of God, by Jesus' great commendation.

This is what makes Good Friday good.

There is hope in the cross, for the darkness is turned to day.

So Jesus dies.

And we stand in close proximity to him today, like the minister at the funeral, except, strangely, the one who is dying is doing the commendation.

It is working the other way around, the crucified man is commending himself to God on our behalf.

Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.

It is sorrowful and strangely hopeful at the same time.

Jesus drives away our fear by plunging into the deepest cause of it.

And we wonder, somewhat perplexed, what's next?

What could possibly happen now?

Where can this death of the saviour be leading?

So we lean in a little closer and press our ears and our hearts to the cross, and wait.

And very faintly we hear our Lord whisper something more in his dying breath.

Something that has been whispered at funerals of the faithful for centuries, and the flickering flame of our faith begins to burn brighter...

Father, into your hands I commit my spirit, in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.