Good Friday – 20230407 – evening service, 7pm

St Timothy’s Episcopal Church – Herndon, Virginia

Sermon preached by The Reverend Philene M Ware Dunn+

Supply priest for the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia

Invited to preach by The Reverend Charles Cowherd+, Priest-in-Charge

Hybrid service – in-person and online

Since Good Friday – no Eucharist, nor serving of reserve

Readings –

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Hebrews 10:16-25

*~~or~~*~~Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9~~

John 18:1-19:42

Psalm 22:1-11

**SERMON**

May God’s Peace be with you and yours. Let us pray.

Almighty God –

By the Grace in your great wisdom and mercy, you save us from sin and eternal death. In your great love, you sent your son, Jesus, our Christ, to teach us your way of life-giving love – both here in our earthly realm and in your heavenly realm. And in the serious challenges facing our Church today, you have entrusted us with the privilege of being your ambassadors. We are honored and we humbly pray for your continued help and guidance by your Holy Spirit to carry on your Son’s, our Lord’s, work in the world. Amen.

Welcome, my friends. And welcome to all of you joining us via the internet this evening.

Every year – Every year – we come to this day, this specific day we call “Good Friday” – “Good Friday” and honestly – I cannot understand what is “good” about it.

It is a most holy day in our church calendar and it is a day filled with deep, deep sorrow and -- shame.

It is the lowest of all days.

It is a day where humanity is at its worst – its most sinful. It is a day of fear, terror, torture, cowardice, bullying, irresponsibility, greed, power-mongering, …. It is a day where humanity is at its most selfish – where people’s will is done – not God’s – but people’s.

And we can see what a day without the acknowledgement of God is like – just look around our sanctuary – there are no visible symbols of God and there is to be no celebration of Christ’s life and teachings like we hear in the Great Thanksgiving – The Eucharist. No God, today. So how can this be a “good” day?

This is a day where the Son of God is crucified – killed on the cross – and gone from our lives. It is a day where we chose to stand alone – we made the choice to be without our Lord.

And this day, this “Good” Friday, is an annual reminder of how our world would be if God had not come and lived and walked among us – to teach us God’s Way – God’s Way of love – a love which is life-giving and nurturing.

Yet – it was all taken away from us 2,000 years ago – it was taken away because we humans made that choice. We chose to have a life lived by our own will. And the result of that choice was an experience of stark emptiness and darkness which had never been experienced before. We experienced on that day how our world would be without the presence of God’s love and God’s grace. And we recreate that experience every year - to remind ourselves of our brokenness and our need for our living Lord.

So, then – how is this called a “good” day?

I am reading a fascinating book right now called “The Astonished Heart” by the Episcopal priest, the Reverend Robert Capon. It is a book exploring the history of the church and the mis-steps it has made through time.

He’s got an interesting exploration of church and power of what he specifically refers to as right-hand power and left-hand power [pp 62-63].

Right-hand power is “the ordinary kind of force by means of which we accomplish almost everything in the world: direct force, aimed at producing a direct effect.” He says 99.99999% of the effects occurring in our physical world can be attributed to right-hand power: from squeezing toothpaste from its tube to building cathedrals, fighting wars, and making love.

And we’ve got recorded instances of God using right-hand power in our Bible. And we have God renouncing that right-hand power after the Great Flood - swearing by the symbol of the rainbow.

Take a moment to think about this. What are all the stories in this Bible trying to impress upon us?

God wants a relationship with us – not a master-slave relationship – not a dominant-subservient relationship. God wants a relationship between free persons – a healthy, trusting, nurturing, loving relationship. And a right-handed power cannot force a loving and trusting relationship – Just like you can’t force someone to love you or to conform to your way of thinking. Just like you can’t force someone to believe in God – And I can speak about that personally – but that’s for another time.

And so today’s readings are all about right-hand power – think about what we just read - humanity’s use of right-hand power. And we see the depths of depravity, corruption, and sinfulness, as that power takes humanity further and further away from a relationship with God.

Yet Jesus, not wanting to use his right-hand power – the power to call forth the heavenly host – he could have done that – we know that don’t we - Jesus uses his left-hand power which for all practical purposes is perceived as weakness. We see he is patient and obedient to God – powerfully patient and powerfully obedient - because his eye – unknowing to them - is on the ultimate prize – the prize of reconciliation for all humanity – and that prize - which includes Jesus’ death and the then yet to be known – though promised – and if they were listening – his death, resurrection, ascension, and return.

And that, my friends, is the mystery of our faith which we declare at each Eucharist: “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.” But on this particular day, this holy day, we are not fully there yet. All we know is that Christ has died. And when you come to venerate the cross – I invite you to not rush. Slow down in your prayer, when touching that cross, and ask God to show you what it was like when Jesus died. Ask God to help you understand, to comprehend, this aloneness that Christ suffered – suffered in this unfathomable darkness and emptiness which we chose for him that day.

And this power of God that saves the world, this left-hand power that Jesus reveals, is the power which has been shown and passed down to us and the church. It is the power, the left-hand power, we are to use in our daily lives as ambassadors of Christ.

And I love how Reverend Capon explains it with this conclusion [p 63]:

“Despite the fact that God’s Old Testament forays into the thicket of fallen human nature were decidedly right-handed ~~(plagues, mighty acts, stretched-out-arm exercises, and thunderous threats)~~ – and despite Jesus’ occasional use of similar tactics in the Gospels – the final act by which God reconciles the world to himself consists of his simply dropping dead on the cross and shutting up on the subject of sin. He declares the whole power game won by losing, and he invites the world just to believe that absurd proposition.” End-of-quote.

And I say, my friends, it is an absurd proposition. It is illogical and unreasonable, yet filled with mystery, the truth, and wonder. God is real and is our living God and lived among us and freed us from sin and death. And maybe, maybe, that is what makes this day “good” – not because of us and our right-hand power but because of God’s left-hand power – God’s goodness – God’s Good Friday – God’s Good Friday.

Amen.

Fr Charles+ – Thank you for the privilege of sharing God’s words this solemn evening with you and the parishioners of St Timothy’s. Humbly, Mtr Philene+