

The Rev. Robert Malm
Palm Sunday
March 25, 2018

The Killing

I have never seen anyone killed; I have seen several people die. Killing is taking someone's life. Killing is ending a life prematurely. Killing is one person or group of persons inflicting the terror of death on another person or group of persons. Thou shalt not kill is the 6th commandment.

Apparently ancient Jewish law made two exceptions to the 6th commandment. A person could be killed, stoned to death, executed for adultery and also for blasphemy. Jesus begins life in the womb of his mother, Mary. Joseph marries Mary, in part, because he was afraid she might be stoned to death for being pregnant before they were married. Jesus ends his life on the cross because the Chief Priests accused him of blasphemy.

"The Killing" is the title of a book written 35 years ago by Richard Holloway, the rector I worked with in Boston at the Church of the Advent. Richard includes a number of "meditations of the death of Christ". He begins his book with a poem entitled "The Killing" by Edwin Muir. Muir writes as an observer, who witnessed the killing of Jesus.

That was the day they killed the Son of God
On a squat hill-top by Jerusalem....

We watched the writhings, heard the moanings, saw
The three heads turning on their separate axles
Like broken wheels left spinning...

I was a stranger, could not read these people
Or this outlandish deity. Did a God
Indeed in dying cross my life that day
By chance, he on his road and I on mine?

This is the week we concentrate upon and commemorate the final events in Jesus' life. We start today with his triumphant entry into Jerusalem and then we move to his crucifixion and death. We return to this killing on Friday when we read John's account.

This is just one week, but the killing of Jesus is something that is at the very core of our faith. The cross is the central symbol of our faith. The killing of Jesus is constantly before us, unless we want to run away from it, or refuse to look at it. To take up the cross and follow Jesus is to see the cross in every aspect of our life and world; to know the lessons we can learn from the cross, from the killing of Jesus; lessons about our world, lessons about God, lessons about ourselves.

The killing of Jesus teaches us about evil and human sin; the desire for power and control; institutional abuse; the use of violence; political and religious intolerance and oppression. The crowd shouts “crucify him”. We know the violence of hatred in the human heart.

The killing of Jesus is also a story of betrayal, of denial. We can also see the power of fear. Judas, Peter, the High Priest, Pilate – they all seem very human because we recognize their behavior in others and even at times in ourselves.

The killing also teaches us about God’s love in Jesus; the power of his love is stronger than the temple police with their “swords and clubs”. The love of God in Jesus sustains him through the interrogation before the Jewish Council and Pilate. Somehow God’s love, the relationship Jesus has with God, strengthens him to endure torture, physical suffering and some six hours of hanging on the cross.

The only word from the cross that Mark records is Jesus crying out with a loud voice the first verse of the 22nd Psalm: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”. This shows us Jesus’ full humanity, questioning God. It also shows us his complete trust and dependency on God. On the cross we experience the fullness of Jesus’ faith. No doubt Jesus prayed more of the verses from Psalm 22 before he “breathed his last”.

Save me...save me... I will praise you...Praise the Lord...stand in awe of him...my soul shall live for him...my descendants shall serve him; they shall be known as the Lord’s forever.

The lessons from the killing of Jesus never end, just as our learning about God, about the mystery of life and love also never end. Ultimately, I remember these lessons when the challenges from human sin and evil are greatest. Jesus’ death on the cross, his Passion, seems most real to me when I experience the closeness and reality of death.

The cross is a symbol of killing of execution, crucifixion. This is how Jesus died. The greater message, the more powerful reality, is love. The cross is a symbol of love. For those who believe, not just a symbol but THE symbol of love – Jesus’ love of God, God’s love for us.

Richard Holloway ends his book with another lesson we can learn from the cross, the lesson of freedom. When Jesus breathes his last, death has been defeated. Jesus freely gives back to God the life which has come from God. “Into your hands I return my spirit” is the last word from Luke’s Gospel, another verse Jesus prayed from the Psalms (31:5) before he died.

Jesus gave his life back to God; no one could take Jesus’ life from him. In that sense he could not be killed. In committing his spirit back to the hands of God, Jesus “reverses the tragedy of all dying. This was the final free act of the only free man. By it we are set free to seek after that freedom.”²

1. Richard Holloway, The Killing, Dayton Longman and Todd, London 1984, opening page.
2. Ibid., p. 74, 75