

Good Friday - 2024

Lose Your Faith!

It grieves me every year to see so much nonsense disseminated during Holy Week. A few years ago, I heard a Good Friday sermon in which it was actually suggested that Jesus, being a carpenter, in order to distract His attention and ease His pain on the cross, may well have admired the quality of its wood. As if our Lord was thinking, *"Nice bit of walnut this. It would make a great desk for the study."* This preacher was serious. I was just flabbergasted that someone would preach such hogwash.

Well, there will be no nonsense here. Today I'm going to deliver shocking, scandalous, scalding truth. I will say outrageous, even sacrilegious things. You may even cringe at some points and not even want to hear any more. That's understandable, because on this Good Friday I am going to attack your faith, wound it, leave it bleeding, dying and dead – just like the man on the cross. Do I have your attention? Good. Well, let me start with some cherished, long-held beliefs I have heard preached at this time of the year.

For example: many people believe that our redemption was achieved by Jesus suffering more horribly than anyone else. Countless Good Friday sermons today around the world will be focussing on the brutality of His crucifixion and how it was the worst thing any human ever endured.

But how could anyone possibly believe that? Crucifixion was most definitely a terrible, excruciating form of torture and execution. But Jesus was only one among thousands and thousands of people who were executed in this barbaric manner under the so-called *Pax Romana* – the 'Roman Peace' – when rugged crosses would stretch for miles down the Apian Way for almost 200 years!

The truth is, the death of Jesus was actually mercifully swift by comparison, He expired by mid-afternoon - most men would languish for days. Besides that, after the Inquisition, after Auschwitz, after the killing fields in southeast Asia, the tribal slaughter in Rwanda, the mass graves in the Balkans, how can anyone possibly presume to compare national atrocities and personal tragedies, let alone grade them according to some calculus of pain?

Then there's the belief that our redemption was achieved by Jesus facing His death more courageously than anyone else. Why does anyone think such a thing? Many of the first Christians faced the most outrageous and painful deaths imaginable, which is why they were hesitant to sensationalise the death of Jesus in terms of martyrdom. So that's nonsense too.

Then there are those who believe that our redemption was achieved by Jesus dying at the hands of evil men, particularly "the Jews." What self-serving propaganda that is! And dare I say - a perverse tonic to the church's long and shameful history of antisemitism.

No, it was not the bestial but the best who killed Jesus. The State in all its glory and religion at its awesome best – *that's* who killed Jesus: not the mob but the upholders of public order; not the wicked but the standard-bearers of morality – they murdered God in their midst.

Yes, the trial was conducted with unseemly haste and the evidence was selectively assembled, but the defendant ended up incriminating Himself. He effectively confessed! So, there were really no grounds for appeal.

For Jesus did undermine a religious system based on law and cult, and Jesus did threaten a political regime which was based on violence and retribution. Jesus acted with freedom and broke the rules, embracing as friends - the dirty, the deviant, and the dangerous.

Jesus prophetically unmasked the mighty pretensions of the local procurator and publicly subverted Caesar's claim to lordship. Jesus really did force the hands of Caiaphas and Pilate and leave them no choice but to get rid of him. *Better that one man dies than that the entire social order be at risk!* That is the tried and trusted scapegoat principle at work. There's no doubt about it, this peasant troublemaker from up north was a profound threat to the status quo and He had to go.

So, maybe ... maybe ... just for one Good Friday, we could forget about the suffering of Jesus, the courage of Jesus, the wickedness of it all. Forget even about the brutal way Jesus died. That is where most people in services like this are being directed today . . . but not here ... not now.

On this Good Friday, I invite you to look at the man – dead – gaze upon the corpse of Christ, fix your eyes on His cold and rigid body, laid out on a slab, already showing some signs of decomposition.

I am thinking of Hans Holbein's famous painting "Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb." The Russian author Dostoevsky saw the painting, in a museum in Basel, stopping on his way to Geneva, and for the rest of his life it haunted him like a nightmare. He describes it in his great novel *The Idiot*. The character Prince Myshkin says: "*Some people may lose their faith by looking at that picture!*"

This sermon doesn't have three points, it just has three words: **Lose your faith!**

(I warned you I would be sacrilegious.) Yes, lose your faith. Lose your faith in God. For as the French mystic Simone Weil insisted, there is a kind of atheism that is purifying, cleansing us of idols. Lose your faith in the god that the cross exposes as a non-god, a sham god, a fraud.

Lose your faith in the god who is just the product of your projections, fantasies, wishes, and needs, a security blanket or good-luck charm god.

Lose your faith in the god who is there to hold your hand, solve your problems, rescue you from your trials and tribulations, the *deus ex machina*, literally the "machine god," wheeled out onto the stage in ancient Greek dramas, introduced to the plot artificially to resolve its complications and secure a happy ending.

Lose your faith in the god who confers upon you a privileged status that is safe and secure. Lose your faith in the god who promises you health, wealth, fulfilment, and success, and pulls rabbits out of hats.

Lose your faith in the god with whom your conscience can be at ease with itself. Lose your faith in the god who, in Dennis Potter's words, is the bandage, not the wound.

Lose your faith in the god who always answers when you pray and comes when you call.

Lose your faith in the god who is never silent, hidden, absent, dead, entombed. For the "Father who art in heaven" – this week, is to be found in hell – with his Son.

No one puts it more starkly – or more honestly and truthfully – than Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Writing from prison, awaiting his own death, he said ...

"We must learn to live in the world as if God were not here. The God, who is with us, is the God who seems to forsake us. Before God and with God we live sometimes without God."

God lets Himself be pushed out of the world and onto the cross – and then down from the cross and into the grave. On this special day we remember the God Who is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which He is with us and truly helps us.

So, yes, lose your faith! For as with life, so with faith: only those who lose it will find it. Or rather *may* find it. Faith is a risk, and discipleship demands that we learn to live with insecurity and uncertainty, setting out on a journey without a map, with companions who are as lost as we are, following a leader who is often way ahead of us, beckoning mysteriously, “Follow me!” and then vanishing just as we arrive. God is mystery, ineffable mystery, naming a reality that we know, but the more we know, the more we are forced to un-know and rethink everything we thought we knew.

I guess it’s about now that you may be thinking, “It’s finally happened – Robert has completely lost his mind. He is taking utter nonsense. Isn’t he supposed to be a preacher and teacher? Isn’t the whole point of a sermon to make it easier to understand God, to increase our faith, so that we can go back to the world feeling edified, uplifted, and ready to share the Good News?”

Not today it’s not. Today I can’t help you. This week no one can help you. This Friday, not even God – especially not God – can help you. And come Saturday, God Himself is lying in a tomb. Emptiness. Zero. Nothing ... But might this be a pregnant emptiness, a significant zero, a silent nothing that actually says absolutely everything?

Well, we shall have to wait until Easter. Only then shall we learn why this Week is Holy, and its Friday is Good. Only then may we experience a new faith rising from the old faith that I pray you will lose today. But you will only lose that counterfeit faith if you let this Friday do it what it did back then. This dark, shocking, unbearably painful Friday continued to crush all those with faith when God was laid in a tomb!

I can assure you that Peter and John and all the disciples lost their faith in the God they had constructed in their own minds on that dark and dreadful day. And they didn’t get to walk away from the dead God, click their fingers, enjoy some fellowship and hot crossed buns! They were devastated and I believe one of the reasons Jesus did not rise from the dead later that day or the next day . . . is because His disciples needed to stay in that place of hopeless despair and nothingness so that every last remnant of faith in a false god could be ripped from their hearts and minds.

So, if you want to really connect with the reality of what this service is supposed to commemorate, I challenge you to let Friday do its job before Sunday comes and lose your faith.

Lose your faith in a god made in our own image.

Lose your faith in a god you can understand and predict.

Lose your faith in a god who makes you feel better about yourself and grateful that you are not like all the others who don’t understand this god like you do!

Lose your faith in that god – for that god is not our God.

The God Whom you encounter on this solemn day, is a God Who is outrageously different to all the gods you may have encountered within the life-destroying tomb of religion.

You cannot comprehend this God, and yet He invites you to try.

You cannot fully experience this God in a broken, sinful world like ours and yet He invites you to try.

You cannot apprehend this God with your mind or with your emotions – He is infinitely bigger than both!

You can only encounter Him deep within our Spirit, which has been regenerated, recalibrated, reconditioned and refocussed for one purpose only, to embrace the Spirit of God Himself and be transformed into the image of His son, our saviour, Jesus Christ.

This truly is a dark and solemn day. There is nothing 'good' about Good Friday ... unless you let it do its job in you ... before you embrace the power and the reality of Easter morning.

Act 1 of this incredible drama ends in despair, darkness and desperation and we are supposed to embrace all of that and not ignore it, while counting down the minutes until Act 2 opens.

We are supposed to find faith in a God Who would allow such despicable barbarism to be unleashed against His own beloved Son.

If we can't find and embrace God in the hell of Good Friday, we will not embrace the true God in the victory and glory of Easter Sunday.

For too many years now we have witnessed millions of Good Friday sermons which attempt to achieve the impossible. Too many preachers try to be pastors in the pulpit as they sanitise and soften and re-imagine the horror of this day so that their congregation don't feel too depressed or downcast as they wait for the good news on Sunday!

Far too often we hear that old adage, *'It's Friday, but Sunday's coming!'* And, just like that ... the crushing reality of this horrible day is lifted off us and we go home feeling much the same as we do most days we leave church. How can that happen on THIS day?

I beg you, in Jesus' name, to lose your faith in a god who would camouflage the horror, the devastation, the unimaginable and outrageous injustice of the death of God!

The wages of sin is death and this is what that death looks like! God, murdered by His own beloved children. God, buried in a borrowed tomb as the world turns away and refuses to see what has actually happened here.

There is nothing more shocking, nothing more unacceptable, nothing more incomprehensible than the horrific reality of what unfolded on this day over 2,000 years ago!

The glory, the brightness, the beauty and the wonder of Easter Sunday will be just a dim, blurry image of reality for anyone who has not deliberately chosen to embrace the utter darkness, the heart-wrenching outrage, the unimaginable grief ... and the necessity ... of Good Friday.

Come, Holy Spirit, open our eyes, open our hearts. Amen.