

Our Capacity for Sacrifice
Palm Sunday, Year A
Matthew 26: 14-27: 66
17 April 2011

At the end of Morning Prayer recently Terry Turner said to me, “It’s odd that the only references to earthquakes in the Bible are in the psalms.” I thought about that for a moment, and then called out to his retreating back, “take a look at the end of Matthew’s gospel – they are there as well.”

What I am referring to are some very unusual verses that most preachers avoid if they can possibly help it. Just after Jesus cries out with a loud voice and breaths his last it reads:

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many.

Much of the content of this is clearly legendary. It is full of apocalyptic motifs, the kind of end of the world language that can embarrass clear thinking rationalists who are in to objective historical accuracy at all costs. And it seems to be out of keeping with the pathos of a lonely tragic death at the local public execution yard.

So why does the author of Matthew’s gospel lay it on with a trowel at this point, piling on the exaggeration for all he is worth? What is the point he is driving at when he makes the earth move in apparent sympathy with the exit of this failed religious leader?

And what was this earthquake all about in God's scheme of things?

There is one detail that could be factually accurate. The curtain of the temple was a beautiful and impressive thing with a depiction of all the stars of heaven on it. If it were miraculously torn in two that would be a symbol of cosmic disturbance, an indication that something of tremendous significance had just taken place. But what exactly?

There are those who argue that the crucifixion of Jesus reveals something that is eternally true about God. It lifts the curtain a little to reveal how he feels about us, and about what he intends for us. In this sense it is a kind of vivid show and tell that gets home the message of his eternal benevolence towards us.

What is more this demonstration of eternal benevolence invites our compassionate and grateful response. Looking at depictions of Jesus on the cross our hearts are moved – so this is how much you love me, we say to ourselves – and we decide to become a follower of Christ.

There is a truth in this. This motivational motif has worked with not a few people in persuading them to become a Christian. And I guess it is the reason why there is often a crucifix mounted behind a pulpit. What the love of Christ crucified means for us is spelled out in visual terms.

But notice the central dynamic in this way of reckoning the crucifixion. It all depends on our response. We hold the initiative, and do the deciding. Humankind is calling the shots. What changes is interior to us. And the cross is reduced to a powerful Divine propaganda tool.

It is to rescue us from this static conception of the Good Friday events that Matthew produces all the special effects that compel our attention, and revise our attitudes. He is shifting the focus on to what God is doing, how he is changing things, how he is producing a reality that wasn't there before. A stupendous shift is taking place in the nature of reality itself – and it is something that we couldn't have done for ourselves.

What happened at death, and after death, was a sharply contested item in Jewish religious opinion back then. But those who did believe in the resurrection of the dead, and who looked forward to the arrival of the Messiah, were also clear about a powerful connection between these two future events. If the Messiah arrived, if he was done to death, and if God then raised him from the dead, then this must be the trigger for the general resurrection of the dead. The righteous would rise with him as all things moved to a conclusion.

So it is that Matthew has the saints who had fallen asleep rising out of their tombs, and going walkabout in Jerusalem. In the crucified death of Jesus, and its flipside the resurrection, the last act of the old aeon has taken place, a new world has been born, nothing will ever be the same again, and there are bound to be some extraordinary signs of this altered reality – hence all the seismic activity and graveyard disturbances.

These last few Sundays I have been talking about the cross as the intersection point of human freedom gone wrong, the accumulated weight of human evil that has to be dealt with, and the determination of a God who won't take no for an answer when it comes to our salvation stakes. What those startling and

embarrassing verses in Matthew are getting at is that there is a dramatic quality to the saving death of Jesus. God in Jesus Christ is making something happen, is taking the initiative, is doing something. This isn't a demonstration of something that is eternally true about God. A new factor is being brought in to play. The sacrifice of Jesus alters the way the universe works.

What precisely God in Jesus Christ does to bring this about is the preaching and explaining challenge I face at the Good Friday Liturgy of the Passion. Come back in five days time to hear the answer.

The punch line for us today is the way the authority of God over our lives is rooted in the sacrifice of Jesus. His action on the cross has set us free from the powers of darkness, and has set us free for life within the fellowship of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. That in turn gives him the right to make claims on our lives.

The state demonstrates its power over our lives by requiring us to pay taxes to it, to obey its law enforcement agencies, and to be prepared to fight and die in its wars. For the Church to be the Church we must allow it a certain authority over our lives. In western societies it has a loose associational nature. People belong to it the way they belong to a hobby club. You go along with it for just as long as it meets your needs, suits your tastes and approve of its leadership decisions. But it is supposed to be much more than that – a community of rich fellowship, and of strong and loyal belonging based around a deep participation in the things of God.

Its claims to authority over us are based on its right to command sacrifice from us. For the Church is the primary manifestation of Christ in the world now. Before he was with us in the form of the biological life of Jesus of Nazareth. Now he is found in his most disclosed form in our world in the Church, where he rules over us “from table, font and pulpit.” At the end the Holy Spirit will shape and form us in to the collective Christ, what Augustine called the *totus Christus*. To call the Church the body of Christ, as Paul did, is to use a metaphor. At the end it wont just be a metaphor – we will have become him, while at the same time becoming most intensely ourselves. Our trajectory in to this transformed modality of existence goes hand in hand with our capacity for sacrifice. What happened on the cross both invites and compels a cruciform style of existence from us.