

Good Friday 2014

A poem, *The Musician*, by the 20th century Welsh priest-poet R S Thomas, describing a concert given by the violinist, Fritz Kreisler:

*A memory of Kreisler once:
At some recital in this same city,
The seats all taken, I found myself pushed
On to the stage with a few others,
So near that I could see the toil
Of his face muscles, a pulse like a moth
Fluttering under the fine skin
And the indelible veins of his smooth brow.*

*I could see, too, the twitching of the fingers,
Caught temporarily in art's neurosis,
As we sat there or warmly applauded
This player who so beautifully suffered
For each of us upon his instrument.*

*So it must have been on Calvary
In the fiercer light of the thorns' halo:
The men standing by and that one figure,
The hands bleeding, the mind bruised but calm,
Making such music as lives still.
And no one daring to interrupt
Because it was himself that he played
And closer than all of them the God listened.*

In this poem, R S Thomas recalls the experience of a concert hall so crowded that there are no seats left, and, instead of listening to the violinist from the comfort and relative distance of the auditorium, Thomas is 'pushed on to the stage', where the experience of Kreisler's musicianship is all the more immediate and intense.

Today we are pushed on to the stage. So often, we regard the cross of Jesus Christ from a distance; from a place where we feel comfortable and secure. We see the pain and the suffering and the agony, but it at such a distance that it remains palatable, respectable. We don't have to get too close.

But today we are pushed on to the stage. For on Good Friday, and in this Solemn Liturgy of the Passion, we behold the cross not from a distance, but *up close*. The nails and the piercing, the bloody sweat and agony, the cries of pain and despair. We are forced, or we force ourselves, to be exposed to him who exposes himself for the sake of the world.

As it was for R S Thomas on Kreisler's stage, what we gaze on, what we listen to, may make us feel uncomfortable. Yet, in that discomfort, even in that desire to back away, so that what we

encounter is less gruesome or less intrusive, what we behold is beautiful. For this is no ordinary death – not, of course, that any death is ordinary – but this is the death of God incarnate. The one who bleeds, suffers and dies in front of us is he who formed us, who existed before time began, who is God from everlasting.

God knits himself so intrinsically with fallen humanity that he embraces the very worst a human being can undergo. And so Jesus unites himself with every person who suffers and with every person who dies, wherever and whenever they may be. On Calvary, he unites himself with the criminals crucified with him. Dying on the cross, he unites himself with the countless people who have died through warfare or natural disaster. Suffering for us, he unites himself with us when we suffer. Trapped on the cross, he is united now with children trapped on a sunken ferry off the coast of South Korea.

Today we are pushed on to the stage. R S Thomas does not go on to describe what his reaction was to experiencing Kreisler's musicianship at such close quarters. But our experience of the Passion of Jesus on Good Friday must elicit a response in us. As each person who listens to music has her or his own interpretation, so each of us responds differently to what we encounter at the cross. But I want to suggest that, whatever our response, it must be underpinned by two essential elements.

Firstly, thanksgiving. 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.' Our response to the passion and death of Jesus Christ must be one of thanksgiving. This is a gift beyond measure. 'Died he for me, who caused his pain,' Charles Wesley wrote, 'for me, who him to death pursued.' By Christ's sacrifice on the cross, the sin of the world is taken away. Christ sanctifies and redeems us. Christ's body is broken to make us whole. His blood is shed to cleanse us from our sins.

And secondly, self-offering. Jesus offers himself for us, and so he calls us to offer ourselves to him. And when we encounter the cross as sharply as we do today, we are caught up in the mystery of God's love. Jesus opens his arms on the cross not as an act of defensiveness or defiance to the world, but rather to accept and embrace the people he has come to save. Those arms are opened in welcome. Our response, lest we shy away completely, must be to accept that invitation, and join our offering with his.

It is why in a few moments time we creep to the cross, and place at the feet of Jesus a kiss. Not, as last night, a kiss of betrayal, but rather a tiny act of commitment to him who commits everything to us. A small token of our desire to be united to Jesus in his suffering, as he desires to be united to us in ours.

The hymn-writer Isaac Watts provides what is perhaps one of the least inchoate descriptions of the human heart's response to the cross of Jesus:

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small,*

*Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

Today we are pushed on to the stage. On one hand, what we look upon with such intensity is unattractive, gruesome, even repugnant. On one hand, everything within us tells us to look away, to come down from the stage, to move on elsewhere. On the other hand, what we look upon with such intensity is beautiful. This is love perfected. This is the most beautiful and precious thing anyone has ever done or will ever do.

Today we are pushed on to the stage. May our hearts overflow with thankfulness for what Jesus has done for us. And as he offers himself up for the life of the world, may we offer our lives to him, a living sacrifice, acceptable in his sight.

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