

Good Friday, April 15, 2022

Luke 25:35-43

In the southern US, in the days before Easter,  
 trios of crosses spring up across the countryside,  
 and Barbara Brown Taylor, a marvelous preacher from that area,  
 describes on particular trio of crosses.  
 She tells how, on the first days she drove by the site,  
 that there were just three upright poles in the ground—  
 the central one about 10 feet high and the other two about 6 feet.

The next time she drove by, she says, crossbeams had been added. . .  
 and, a few days later, all the crosses were painted white. . .  
 and a few after that, a purple cloth flapped in the wind  
 on the central cross.

It was a lot of work for someone, she goes on to say,  
 and she wondered why the person didn't stop with that one cross  
 which would have gotten the basic message across.

But, as she thought about it, she began to change her mind  
 when she came to the realization that one cross  
 is not the same message as three crosses—  
 because while one cross is a crucifix,  
 three crosses make a group. . .  
 or, to put it another way, three crosses make a church.

All the gospel writers agree that Jesus didn't die alone,  
 although Luke is the one who report his conversation  
 with the other two who died with him. . .  
 although, under the circumstances, "conversation" may be too mild a term.

It all starts after they had been hanging there for a while.  
 Jesus is getting most of the attention from the crowd, perhaps because  
 the sign above his head is more spectacular than the others.  
 "This is the King of the Jews" it says,  
 while the signs on the other two crosses  
 aren't even interesting enough to record.

According to Matthew and Mark, they are robbers,  
but Luke doesn't even say that much.

"Criminals" he calls them, so take your pick:  
Thieves, tax evaders, runaway slaves, rebels.

The point is that whatever they had done,  
one of them doesn't think it was as bad as what Jesus had done  
because he joins the crowd in jeering at Jesus.

"Aren't you the Messiah?" he sneers.  
I thought you are the Messiah.  
Everyone says you are the Messiah,  
so why don't you get us out of here?"

And it isn't something he says under his breath either  
because the other criminal, way over on the side of Jesus,  
hears him and snaps back: "Don't you fear God?" he says,  
defending the dying man between them.  
"We are getting what we deserve for our deeds,  
but this man has done nothing wrong."

Even on the cross, Jesus is surrounded by controversy,  
attacked from one side and defended from the other  
by two men who are as different as they can be.

Luke doesn't name them, but according to the apocryphal gospel of Nicodemus—  
which is an unsupported and unsubstantiated book  
that never made into the Bible—  
their names are Dismas and Gestas:  
Dismas being the criminal who defends Jesus  
and Gestas being the one who would have spit on Jesus  
if he could have gotten himself turned around right.

In her sermon, Taylor makes the following observation about dying people—  
which is that they become more who they are than they have ever been.  
As she puts it: The approach of death seems to sap the strength  
that they once had for pretending or covering up who they are.

Their disguises fall away along with their defences,  
 until all that is left is the condensed version of themselves  
 in which the core of the human being is laid bare and open.

The result, as some of you may well have observed or experienced yourselves—  
 the result of this “shedding” of disguises and pretences  
 is that some people become “meaner than snakes” Taylor puts it  
 while others become almost luminous or saintly—  
 and it isn’t always easy to tell ahead of time  
 who will turn out to be whom.

Judging from Gestas’ bitter behaviour on the cross,  
 it seems reasonable to conclude  
 that he had been a bitter man most of his days.  
 Maybe he learned early on in his life that there was no sense  
 hoping for much since everything he loved  
 would be taken away from him sooner or later.

And maybe he really was a thief, who dedicated himself  
 to stealing back what he thought had been stolen from him.  
 But, regardless, however it happened and whatever he was,  
 he doesn’t blame himself for what has happened to him.  
 Instead, he blames other for that they have done  
 or not done to make him who he is.

His death sentence probably came as no surprise to him  
 for he has been expecting as much for most of his life  
 but, when it finally comes, he bears no responsibility for it.  
 Whatever had done to earn it, in his mind, it is not his fault  
 but is the judge’s fault or the jury’s fault  
 or the arresting officer’s fault or God’s fault. . .  
 maybe even the fault of the man hanging beside him  
 who, if he really is the Messiah, should be able  
 to get all of them out of the mess they find themselves in.

Dismas, on the other hand, seems to know what has done  
 to wind up where he is: “We are getting what we deserve” he says.

In one sense, we may say that he has a sense of justice,  
 even if it has given him a “thumbs down”. . .  
 and he is therefore willing to own up to his part in the verdict.  
 But who knows what allow him to do that?

Maybe he is one of those half-hearted criminals  
 who are relieved to finally be caught. . .  
 or maybe he is just a gambler with some level of integrity,  
 convinced that what has happened and is happening to him  
 is simply the “luck of the draw” —  
 and therefore the only thing he can do is to accept the hand  
 that fate has dealt him with as much dignity as he can muster.

Whatever the reason, he seems to know that the one sure move  
 left to him in his life is to accept responsibility of what he has done  
 and to face the consequences. . .and so,  
 while Gestas rails against the seeming injustice of his life  
 and curses everyone he has ever known  
 for putting him on this cross,  
 Dismas takes and accepts what has happened  
 and opens his arms to his approaching death.  
 “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” he says.

The man still has some hope!  
 Hanging there as bloody, exhausted and guilty as he is,  
 he recognizes someone who is different than he is. . .  
 someone is going on further than he is. . .  
 someone in whose memory he might survive.

“Jesus, remember me.” That’s all he asks for—  
 to be remembered. . .but he is granted a great deal more.  
 “Truly I tell you,” the man on the middle cross says to him,  
 “Today you will be with me in paradise.”

There all still hours to go before that promises comes true—  
 long hours in which Luke reports no more talk between the prisoners.

And yet, whatever and however the symbol of those three crosses  
survives, remains and means--their conversation continues.  
Gestas and Dismis both have their says  
while Jesus bridges the distance between them—  
between the bitter man and the hopeful man. . .  
between the lost and the found.

And that conversation continues today, in this place, in our midst. . .  
between Jesus and us. . .whether we are bitter or hopeful. . .  
whether we are lost and hoping to be found. . .  
or found and profoundly grateful for that fact, that truth.

You see, there may only be one cross in front of us today  
but God knows we are hanging on the other two. . .  
and whenever we stand or sit in this place, around this cross,  
we complete the scene. . .fill out the picture. . .  
because, you see, one cross makes a crucifix  
but three crosses make a church.

Amen.      SDG