

14 April 2017

Passio: Good Friday (John 18:28-19:37)

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Last night, in the garden, we remembered the moment that Jesus was handed over. It was a ‘moment’ that had a deep hinterland – he’d been moving towards it for a long time, maybe all his life. He’d been aware of the hours of daylight drawing in and yesterday, ‘night fell’. He was handed over and bound, the machinery of judicial execution swinging inexorably into motion. And last night I quoted W.H. Vanstone, who said that, at this moment Jesus ‘passed from action to passion, from the role of subject to that of object and from working in freedom to waiting upon what others decided and receiving what others did’.¹

Except that, here in John’s gospel, Jesus seems much less an object, much less at the mercy of events than he does in the other gospel narratives. In those other accounts of his trial, Jesus is almost mute, silenced before Pilate, but here he’s positively loquacious. Where Mark and Matthew have him crying out in dereliction – ‘My God, my God why have you forsaken me?’, and Luke speaks of his ‘loud cry’ as he gives up his spirit, John has him organising his mother’s future, deliberately fulfilling the scriptures, and composedly announcing his own end. As one writer has said, it’s as if Jesus here is ‘taking care of business’. It can feel harder to identify with this Jesus, harder to feel he is truly human and suffers – confusion, abandonment, agony – as we do.

Well, I think it’s true that we’re less likely to identify emotionally with John’s Jesus – less likely to feel sorry for him, or imaginatively to share his pain. But for this very reason, something else is brought into sharper focus. It is the enormity of what happens here. Because this really is the Son of God who goes under, who is self-

¹ W.H. Vanstone, *The Stature of Waiting*, (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2006), p.31.

yielded to death, annihilation, non-being. It really is God, the Creator of the world, who, for our sake, is exposed to the world unconditionally, withholding nothing.

This state of exposure is where we live, all the time. Often we're able to pretend otherwise. My death is not imminent. Tragedy has not struck my life, my family, my community. If I don't look too closely at how flimsy the white-picket fence, there seems a space in which I may live, relatively safe, relatively undisturbed. But, like a rumble in the distance, like a rumour of far-away famine or war or coral bleaching, I know that danger lurks. And then, one day, something comes crashing through – some inrush of chaos, of overwhelming. A phone call with news of an accident, a diagnosis, a failure, a shame, a farewell note ... and all of a sudden we too are unprotectedly exposed to what the Swiss theologian Karl Barth named *Das Nichtige*, 'the crushing irresistible force of disorder as yet untamed and on the loose in our world'.²

We never go willingly into this state of being whelmed over, this terrifying loss of stability and well-being. And we find it hard to be with others when it happens to them – really to be with others I mean, not just with superficial expressions of sympathy but alongside in the darkness and disintegration, being with the truth that nothing is getting better any time soon. Simone Weil said when someone is struck with the kind of blow that leaves them 'struggling on the ground like a half-crushed worm', then when compassion for them is really found 'we have a more astounding miracle than walking on water, healing the sick, or even raising the dead'.³

No, we never go willingly into this place – for ourselves or even vicariously, alongside others. But Jesus did. And John's gospel makes sure we know that this was, for Jesus, a deliberate, pre-meditated act – a choice. And what does this choice, this willing undergoing of our *Nichtige* make visible? God's love, God's astounding desire to be 'with us'. This is what Jesus means when he says that the hour has come to

² Cited from Walter Brueggemann in Celia Kemp, *Deep Calls to Deep*, ABM 2017.

³ Simone Weil. *Waiting on God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Collins Fontana Books, 1959), p.79.

glorify God – that is, to make God finally, truly known. Vanstone writes: ‘It can be no coincidence that the writer who in his Gospel most clearly discerns the glory of God in the handing over of Jesus is also the writer who ... [declares] that “God is love”’⁴.

For here, on this cross, we see the glory of God which is the love of God who wills to be wholly with us in our night, our exposure, our terrifying fragility. With him, in him, and through him we are accompanied in the dark, the flood; and with him, in him, and through him we become companions to one another. That is both the gift and the call of the cross.

So hear again, Jesus’ words, spoken on the brink of his passion: ‘Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them’ (17: 25-26).
Thanks be to God.

⁴ Vanstone, *The Stature of Waiting*, p.95.