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A Great Rending (Matthew 27: 1-56)

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There's a terrible violence in Matthew's account of Good Friday. It starts with the authorities' refusal to accept Judas' repentance. He's served his purpose. No one cares about him anymore, and his remorse is cast back in his face. 'What are your second thoughts to us?' Left to his guilt, despairing, Judas departs without a word and hangs himself, his thirty pieces of silver callously taken up to purchase the so-called 'Field of Blood'. The violence carries on in the braying insistence of the crowd that Jesus be crucified, overwhelming Pilate's half-hearted reluctance. It's further reflected in the text itself, with its totalizing attribution of blame to the Jewish people 'as a whole'. 'His blood be on us and on our children!' Matthew has them cry, thereby unleashing centuries of murderous anti-semitism in Christian culture.

And relentlessly, this bitter passion grinds on. The soldiers strip Jesus, twist a crown of thorns for his head; they mock him, strike him and spit on him, then take him away to crucify him. The passers-by too seem utterly pitiless, deriding him, shaking their heads, giving him his come-uppance: 'You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross'. And the two bandits crucified with him taunt him in the same way.

From noon, darkness comes over the whole land, and then comes Jesus' cry of utter dereliction: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Even then, most of those clustered around the cross seem untouched by his agony, concerned only to satisfy their curiosity: 'Wait let us see whether Elijah will come to save him'. And when Jesus breathes his last, it's as if his violation is transposed into a rending of the whole world. At that moment, 'the curtain of the temple was torn in two ... The earth shook, and the rocks were split'.

I find the violence of this passion narrative difficult to be with. It's almost as if it does a kind of violence to me, to us, to our sense of our own humanity. The gospel of Luke's account of Jesus' death differentiates between people's responsiveness. There are women in Jerusalem who weep for Jesus, there's the 'good thief' who recognises and responds to him from the cross. And Jesus himself is tender towards those around him: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'. And to the thief beside him: 'This day you will be with me in Paradise'. But in Matthew's account, it's as if there are no differences between people, between us. All partake in taunting, humiliating, disregarding Jesus; and he himself seems drawn away from us into his own private agony, lost, separated, unable to give us comfort or reassurance. This is a bleak view of humanity and of the cost of redemption.

It might seem that the bleakness of this picture is overstated, even unhealthy. Some protest that it feeds a violent theology of atonement and an obsession with 'sin', because it fails to balance the good with the bad, the light as well as the darkness in humanity. And I think this is true, at least in part. But I wonder if a danger with this kind of protest, this call for a more 'balanced' view, is that it too can be falsifying. It can be a way for us to avoid having to face the depth and ubiquity of human cruelty and self-centredness – of all in us that lacks pity, refuses mercy, and would rather kill off someone else, rather kill off the earth itself, than face our own fear or rage or shame.

One of the most powerful explorations I know of this dimension of our humanity comes from the recent Irish film, *Calvary*. The story is of a Catholic priest who's told that he will be killed in a week's time, by someone who had been abused by a priest in his childhood. The priest in the story is not himself an abuser – he's a good man. And this is precisely why he is chosen to be the victim. As his soon-to-be murderer says, only if a good priest is killed will anyone take notice. The film follows the priest through his personal Holy Week, his agonizing decision not to run away, to continue faithful to his work. And what's I find most confronting of all is the film's depiction of the people around him – those in his village and his church. He is giving

himself to them, for them, but they barely notice. They're incapable of really paying attention to anyone but themselves; their lives are consumed by ambition and greed, by domestic violence, gossip, disappointment, self-satisfaction, complaint, blame and hollow desperation. We see it revealed clearly in them; we recognize it in ourselves.

It's not that this is all there is to humanity. But it is there. In some, this latent violence is given full expression, while others of us are less possessed and it comes out only under pressure, as in the midst of a pandemic, when suddenly brawls erupt over toilet paper, blameless shop assistants are abused, and foreigners scapegoated. What the gospel of Matthew is saying is that if our humanity is to be healed at root, if the whole of our nature is to be transformed, then in some mysterious way the full force of our pitilessness and latent violence must be undergone, consciously encompassed, and brought to God. On the cross, it's as if all the darkness of the world is concentrated to a single point, and Jesus consents to be utterly eclipsed by humanity's shadow.

It is a desolating journey, a desolating truth. And yet, for all this, Matthew insists that in Christ this confrontation with the worst of our humanity is ultimately reconciling. At the moment Jesus breathes his last, at the moment his self-giving is complete, the curtain of the temple is torn in two. In Jewish theology, the veil of the temple was what separated the Holy of Holies – the very presence of God – from the created order. Now the connection between heaven and earth, between God and ourselves, is opened definitively. There is no more separation to be overcome. And simultaneously, the tombs are opened, 'and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised'. The separation between the dead and the living, the past and the present, between bitter memory and future promise, is likewise overcome. Rowan Williams says that 'God is the "presence" in which all reality is present'.¹ Even before Jesus' resurrection, death is losing its capacity to seal off life.

¹ Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, revised ed. (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2002), p.23.

Today we remember what Jesus has done for us; we wonder at the love that undergoes our worst, so as to liberate our best; we receive the courage to face the darkness in ourselves and in our world because in Christ it has already been faced. And if we will just let ourselves go there with him, we will find grace freely given and the veil of the Temple torn.