

'This is Your Hour and the Power of Darkness' – A Homily for Palm Sunday

The Passion according to Luke

Reading the passion narrative in Luke's Gospel again this year, I have been struck with the same short sentence that always seems to take us to the heart of what is going on.

Straight after Jesus' anguished praying on the Mount of Olives an aggressive crowd accosts him with Judas his friend and disciple leading them. With the intimacy of a kiss the violence erupts as Jesus' disciple cuts off the ear of one of the high priest's slaves. Just as he has silenced the chaos of the winds and waves before, Jesus silences the violence and dangerously reaches out his own hand to touch, heal and restore. But this time the violence and the hatred will not be so easily abated and the crowds push in on him. Jesus speaks this truth into what is about to happen: 'this is your hour; and the power of darkness.'

'This is your hour and the power of darkness.' Throughout the Gospel of Luke we are given a vision of heaven. It is not an easy and comforting vision: of soft clouds with harp-playing angels, or rolling green hills with lambs bleating and nuns singing; instead it is a vision of the costly triumph of love. We see it as Jesus sends out the seventy to heal, forgive and to cast out demons, breaking people out of the swirling violence, hatred and hurt that have kept them bound all their lives; we see it as they are sent out as 'lambs among wolves' to live in perfect hospitality, welcome and generosity in a dangerously greedy and self-obsessed world. This vision of heaven assaulting our world is given shape as Jesus says to the triumphant seventy as they return: 'I saw satan fall like lightning.' This is a heaven that suffers violence as it seeks to overcome the darkness, injustice, hatred and sin of our world.

That this is a costly heaven, hard won, is made clear as Jesus says to the gathered mob: 'this is your hour and the power of darkness,' and it is made all the more clear by

Jesus' strange statement made to the thief who hangs on the cross with him in the moment of death. 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'

Uniquely in Luke's Gospel, Jesus is not alone as he is crucified, two thieves are with him, to his right and to his left. At this moment of extreme suffering, a moment that displays like no other before or since the costly way of love, one of the thieves taunts him, getting it just as wrong as we do: 'if you are the Messiah, then save yourself and us!' If you are chosen and loved by God then save us from this suffering, help us escape to the heaven where there is no conflict, where we can wallow in our own fantasies of self-righteousness and personal fulfilment. But the other thief sees through all of this. 'We have been condemned justly, but this man has done nothing wrong. Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'

This second thief can see that the cross is the moment where heaven finally and fully engulfs our world. Right into the midst of the worst of our violence and self-hatred, overwhelming our fantasies and need for self-justification, comes the advent of love. At this moment heaven is unleashed as Jesus turns – in the midst of hostility, sin and death – and forgives. This is the only heaven that we can know, a heaven that at the most painful and costly moment we can imagine, turns the violence away and seeks to heal, to restore, to forgive. The second thief understands that and so hangs on the cross with Christ in paradise.

This Holy Week, we are asked to follow Jesus in walking the way of the cross. We will be caught up in its drama and desolation, and we will find ourselves caught between two movements. The first is the ever escalating violence of our world in which love is seen as threatening and destabilising, something to be cast out and annihilated. But the second is the movement of God itself, right in the middle of all of this painful drama, short-circuiting its violence through an uncompromising forgiveness and a reckless love. Where will we take our stand?