



Sermon: - 9th April 2017

Reflections on the Cross

Psalm 31: 9 -16; Philippians 2: 5 – 11

I've told you before about the time David took our elder son, Iain, fishing so apologies for repeating myself but it's relevant today as well. At that point in time Iain was working for a computing games firm and his job was to write the programming which created the water; the lochs and rivers that made up the scenery, the backdrop, for the game that they were working on. It was a perfect day for fishing; not too bright, not too warm, and not too much wind. David looked out over the loch to watch for the fish rising. He was delighted to see evidence of quite a lot of activity near the surface of the water. He turned to Iain, and was about to say, "It looks like a great fishing day" when Iain interrupted him with, "Dad, do you see the way the light is reflected on the water, and the way the reflections move and change, isn't that amazing?"

When I was thinking about this sermon I began thinking about what the cross means to different people, I began to "reflect" on it. Then it occurred to me that the word "reflect" has two meanings, related but different. To "reflect" means to consider something, to think, to ponder. But it also means to give back or show an image of an object; to mirror.

So when I began to think about that sort of reflection. I remembered David's experience of Iain's reaction to the water on that fishing trip. I remembered how that experience had reflected something of the nature of the two people, their priorities and their preoccupations, how it had in a sense mirrored them. When David looks at water, it reflects a fisherman. When Iain looks at water it reflects an artist. And so it occurred to me that when we look at the cross, our reaction to it will depend very much on who we are, and so to that extent the cross reflects back to us an image of ourselves.

So what kind of images might we see when we look at the cross? What does it tell us about the kind of people we are, our priorities and our preoccupations? What does it reflect to us of who we are?

Mel Gibson's film, "The Passion of the Christ" has been criticised heavily by some people. It has been called "anti-semitic" and "gratuitously violent". There is no doubt that both these elements could be said to be there, if you are looking for them, but these criticisms say more about the people watching than they do about the film.

The film, as I understand it, is as far as possible an accurate portrayal of what actually happened in Jerusalem 2000 years ago as well as an accurate portrayal of the mechanics of crucifixion – and that was the purpose of it, to tell the truth about the reality of the events rather than giving us the sanitised versions we normally get. To take the charge of anti-Semitism first; the Crucifixion of Christ has been the basis of a justification for anti-semitism for hundreds of years, so it is no surprise in a sense that it rears its ugly head again, but what that reaction shows us is the need to blame someone else. The gospel message is that each one of us put Christ on the cross. The hands that put him there were Roman hands, the will that put him there was a Jewish will and intention, but the responsibility for the act belongs to each and every one of us. To see anti-semitism in the cross betrays a need to escape culpability, to blame someone else.

So what about the violence? It is an extremely violent film. But then crucifixion is an extremely violent form of death. And although throughout the centuries we have been presented with various versions, it has always been a sanitised version. Paintings, and more recently films, have cleaned it up, made it less brutal. We have interpreted it in gold and in silver and we wear it around our necks or in our ears, or hang it on our walls. But it was brutal and bloody. It is the act of crucifixion that is gratuitously violent, not the portrayal of it in film. Perhaps those who cannot cope with the violence of the film cannot cope with the violence of the cross. Do they want to escape the knowledge that that was what happened? Do they want to hide from the implications of Jesus death? To see gratuitous violence in this is to want to deny the reality of what happened in Galilee 2000 years ago. So these criticisms reflect, not the truth of the film, but the priorities of the people who make the criticisms.

In the same way, when we consider the people who gathered around the cross of Jesus on that crucial day we see in them, too, a range of reactions, a variety of images reflected in the cross.

There were those who mocked and jeered. The fickle crowd who had cheered and waved just a few days previously. They presumably could not see the significance in what was happening. They believed what they were told to believe. They could not, or did not, think for themselves, took everything at face value. There was no sense for them that that afternoon's entertainment, and that's what it was, just as in Britain we used to have outings to watch the latest hanging , no sense that that afternoon's entertainment had any

implication for them or their lives. The shallowness of their commitment to praising Jesus at the beginning of the week was reflected in a shallow response to his dying at the end.

And today too there are those for whom the cross reflects nothing back, because there is nothing to reflect. Their lack of understanding, their lack of any sense of occasion, any sense of significance or sense of the spiritual, is reflected in their lack of response to the cross and the crucifixion. They do not see because they do not want to see.

For Peter, the cross reflected failure. He was afraid to stand out from the crowd, afraid to stand up for his Lord. Perhaps what the cross reflected of him was his fear and his cowardice.

Perhaps sometimes we are like Peter; what we see when we look at the cross is our own failure, our own sin and inadequacy. Perhaps we have the sense, as Peter may have had, that it was our actions which put him there, our fallibility and our flaws which allowed this to happen. And there is a sense in which that is indeed the case. Humanity murdered God. Our sin, our determination to go our own way, our selfishness, as human beings, led to Jesus' death on the cross. Although it was 2000 years ago we are human and so we are implicated in the sins of humanity. And we are personally fallible, and we have flaws, and we sin, and so there is a sense in which we are all implicated in the death of Jesus. We may not deny him as Peter did but perhaps we deny him in other ways. By not always living as he would want us to live, by not always living up to the standards he set and course sometimes by not being open about the truth of our faith in him. We too deny our Lord, in ways explicit and implicit.

For Mary the Mother of Jesus, and for the disciple John, what the cross reflected was love. She brought to the cross her love for her son. John, we believe, was the disciple whom Jesus loved and who loved him in return. And that love was reflected back to them from the cross, as the dying Jesus took thought for them and in care and compassion encouraged them to love one another, to be mother and son to one another.

Does the cross reflect love for us? When we look at the cross, are we aware of what Jesus did? As Paul said in his letter to the Philippians, "Jesus did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Does that ultimate sacrifice inspire us to love him back?"

Salvador Dali in his famous painting, Christ of St John of the Cross, said he painted Christ on the cross without nails because it was love that held him there! Do we see that? Do we love him for it?

And what of the Roman Centurion? This man was affected by what he saw. He had a sensibility to the occasion which many others did not have. He discovered within himself a sense of the spiritual, an awareness of the grand scale of events which his fellow soldiers did not have. His openness to the spiritual, his willingness to see beyond the surface, his capacity to reflect on what he witnessed meant that what he saw reflected in the cross was something of profound significance. "Truly, this man was the son of God"

We bring so much of ourselves into this encounter. When we look at the cross, what does it reflect of us? Do we want to shy away from the reality of it? Do we want to shift the blame onto someone else? Are we afraid to think for ourselves, or are we traumatised by the violence of it. Or perhaps like the Roman Centurion we see that something miraculous is happening here. Does it challenge us to think more deeply about the meaning of Jesus life and death; it's purpose. What happened and why?

The Passion of Christ was a momentous event. It is historic, cataclysmic, and potentially life-changing. But only if we look at it as if into a mirror. Only if we see there our own selves, the consequences of our actions, the results of our failures. Because only then do we see how much we need the love and the forgiveness which he offers us. Only then can we see God's love for us, in spite of our failures and faults. Only then do we want turn to him in humility. Only then are we open to receive the care and the compassion which Jesus offers us, the overwhelming, passionate and compassionate love for each and every one of us which cries out at the moment of death, "Father forgive them, they don't know what they are doing".