
Questions And Answer, Good Friday And The Cross

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
Good Friday

*"O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark,
The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant,
The captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters,
The generous patrons of art, the statesmen and the rulers,
Distinguished civil servants, chairmen of many committees,
Industrial lords and petty contractors, all go into the dark.*

*...And we all go with them, into the silent funeral,...
I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God."*

*"...The dripping blood our only drink,
The bloody flesh our only food;
In spite of which we like to think
That we are sound, substantial flesh and blood-
Again, in spite of that, we call this Friday good." (T.S. Eliot, "Four Quartets")*

T.S. Eliot was right. In spite of this, in spite of that, we call this Friday good.

It is fashionable in some circles today to rejoice in the questions. Stay with our questions, some say. Our questions are more important than our answers, some say.

Well, if so, then Good Friday is certainly a day for rejoicing; because every question in the world is asked today. In fact, the questions have been gurgling to the surface for weeks now, in Sunday School classes with our children, at adult Bible studies, even between partners and lovers, husbands and wives, at dinner time, or over drinks.

They are tough questions. Why did Jesus have to die? Who actually is responsible for Jesus' death? Would we be saved if Jesus had not died? If Jesus is actually God, does the crucifixion mean that God died on the cross? How could that be? Does the blood of Jesus really save humankind? If so, how? Why is there evil in the world?

Listen to the questions today. Jesus asks, "Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?" A servant girl asks Peter, "You are not one of this man's disciples, are you?" "Didn't I see you in the garden with him?" Pilate asks Jesus, "Are you the King of Jews?" and then he asks the great question, "What is truth?" Pilate then asks the raucous crowd, "Shall I crucify your king?"

And the last question, the last question, belongs to Jesus himself, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?"

Well, I am not one of those who thinks that we should rejoice only in the questions. I grow tired of that tack. I love questions as well as the next person, but I also need some answers.

Like T.S. Eliot, like the Church itself, I call this Friday "good." That is a declaration for me, a statement, not a question at all. Today is an answer for me.

I call this Friday good.

Why did Jesus die? Because we all die. No one can save us if he does not know death himself. The only one who can save me is one who has known what I have known. My healer, as Henri Nouwen reminded us, my healer is a wounded healer. My savior is a savior who has died.

Did the Jews kill Jesus? Of course not! I grow angry on every Good Friday when I hear John's gospel. John is probably my favorite gospel, because of its mystery and glory. But I despise John's slander of the Jews. The Jews did not kill Jesus. It was not even the Roman civil authorities such as Pontius Pilate. It was us. It was me. I crucified him.

I crucify Jesus every time I refuse love. Jesus was killed by those who refused love two thousand years ago. Jesus was killed by us who refused love only yesterday. Jesus knows what it is to have love refused. Jesus knows death.

How then are we saved? What does one noble rabbi's death two thousand years ago have to do with my life today? It is here that we make the Christian claim. Jesus was more, much more, than merely a noble rabbi. Indeed, Jesus was somehow qualitatively different, divinely different. He was us, he was human, he knew life and death; but he was also someone essentially different from us. He was divinity dying on the cross.

Jesus saves us because he was more than just a good man. Jesus was the very incarnation of love.

*Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame.* (T.S. Eliot)

Like many of you, I have sat beside people who are dying. I have sat with families who watch, who sit at the bed and simply watch, the transition from life to death. That time is holy time. It is some of the holiest time I know. Yes, it is sad, enormously sad; but it is often holy. It is often life-giving.

Such is this moment today, as we sit and watch. As we kneel and watch. As we stand and pray. As we note the intrusion of death into life. As we note the birth of new life.

"Death is the mother of beauty." That's how the poet Wallace Stevens meditated on the relationship between religion and nature, in a poem he titled, "Sunday Morning." "Death is the mother of beauty."

The grave of Jesus is not merely empty and forlorn. It is the very source of new life. From its emptiness, God creates Sunday morning. The Cross of Jesus is not merely the location of burden and pain; it is love incarnate.

*We die with the dying;
See, they depart, and we go with them.
We are born with the dead:
See, they return, and bring us with them.* (T.S. Eliot)

Why is there evil in the world? Why is there death?

The answer to that question is before us today. It is not a rational or logical answer, but it is the answer. It is the Cross of Jesus Christ.

The Christian religion has no logical answer to the question "Why is there evil?" We have only the cross, and it is enough.

The cross means that evil and pain and death do exist, whether we have a logical reason for them or not. Evil exists, but Jesus has borne that evil to the cross. In so doing, evil is overcome. Evil is overcome, not by avoiding it, not by explaining it away, but by dying with it. Jesus overcomes evil by dying.

All shall be well. "All shall be well" was how Eliot concluded his poem, "Four Quartets." They are the same words that Dame Julian knew: "All shall be well." "All shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

This wellness, this salvation, does not result from having the rational answers to all our questions. There are mysteries that lie beyond our feeble minds. The great mystery of today, which is the great answer of today, is Love.

We try our best to put love into human categories. We associate Jesus's death with theories of blood sacrifice and atonement. We construct elaborate theories of God's justice and human penalty.

But today, none of those theories prevails. It is love that prevails. Only the power of love is strong enough to declare the great answer, "All shall be well." "It is finished." This death is a holy moment. This death is the mother of beauty itself. This death is the answer to what it means to be forsaken. This death is the answer to what is truth.

Love is the answer to what is truth. Holy and self-giving love. In this love of Jesus, we give, too. In this love of Jesus, we die, too. In this love of Jesus, we live, too. It is finished.

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