

Homily

April 19, 2019

Good Friday

The Rev. Gary R. Brower, PhD

Isaiah 52.13-53.12

Psalm 22

Hebrews 10.16-25

John 18.1-19.42

After the second day of battle at Gettysburg, Confederate General James “Pete” Longstreet anticipated the following day with dread. He had seen two of his divisions lose half their strength on the disastrous assault on Little Round Top. He knew that, during the course of the night the Union troops would be reinforced, and that the next day’s fight, if it were to come, would exact heavy losses on his army. His friend and leader, Robert E. Lee—almost a god to the Confederate troops—seemed to be oblivious to the balance of power situation, so focused was he on the opportunity to defeat the Army of the Potomac. During a conversation with a British observer, it all became clear to Longstreet. His night-time musings were imagined in Michael Shaara’s brilliant historical novel, *The Killer Angels*:

The truth kept coming. He had known this for a long time but had never said, except in fragments. He had banked it and gone on with the job, a soldier all his life. In his mind he could see Lee’s beautiful face, and suddenly it was not the same face.

Longstreet said good night [to the Englishman]. He sat alone on his horse in the dark. There was a fire in the field. A boy was playing a harmonica, frail and lovely sound. Longstreet thought of Barksdale as he had gone to die, streaming off to death, white hair trailing him like with fire He thought, tactics are old Napoleon and a lot of chivalry.

He shuddered. He remembered that day in church where he prayed from the soul and listened and knew in that moment that there was no one there, no one to listen.

“Don’t think on these things. Keep an orderly mind. This stuff is like heresy.” (252-53)

The following day, General Lee ordered Longstreet to attack Cemetery Ridge. Longstreet had the charge led by General George Pickett. It was horrific.

In my work as a pastor, with college students and others, I hear stories of deep, profound despair. I remember working with students who suffered from bi-polar syndrome, clinical depression, or Tourette’s syndrome. We’ve certainly seen similar patterns appear in other, younger, folks as well—as recently as this week. The symptoms of those conditions are compounded by highly stressful academic atmospheres, problems with boyfriends/girlfriends. Add to that stew the uncertainty of finding the right job or

most satisfying major, or being bullied, and the darkness and despair that, associated with mental illness, can drive someone to the edge of that dark side of mass shootings and/or suicide. Being in the hospital with some of those young people after such self-harming attempts is terribly frightening . . . a reminder of the fragility of our existence, and the tenuous nature of our hold on reality.

And then, of course, I imagine that even the “healthiest” of us can recall those nights when, jolted out of the respite of sleep, we find ourselves in the midst of what I call “night terrors”. All the mis-steps of my life join forces with unfinished business, ally themselves with strained relationships, and, together, conspire to keep me from returning to sleep. The hell that yawns before my middle-of-the-night musings is often so distracting that even prayer is forced out of the “options” category.

The point when Jesus hit that brick wall of despair is what we mark today, in our Good Friday liturgy. We’ve heard his cry of dereliction; we’ve witnessed his death; we’ve seen his burial. No one knows what went on in his mind. And with two millennia of sanctity surrounding him, it is hard for many of us to really accept that he felt such despair, such abandonment. WE feel it, but not Jesus.

This day is real . . . gritty real. It flies in the face of the dominant religiosity of our day, what sociologist Christian Smith calls “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” (*Soul Searching*, 166). As Smith observes, this pervasive religion of our country is all about feeling good, happy, secure, being at peace . . . attaining subjective well-being, being able to solve problems and getting along amiably with others (164). The god of this religion is not demanding . . . his job is to solve our problems and make people feel good . . . a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist.

A crucified Jesus has no place in our Moralistic Therapeutic Deism — no more than he had in the messianic expectations of his own time. Jesus, who we believe better reflects God than anyone, or anything, else, clearly did experience despair. It is part of the human experience that he folded into the divine experience. It is not pretty. It does not “feel good”, but it is real. And what we mark today is the occasion of that deepest of despairs becoming part of the divine reality, not so that it can be taken off of our human table by the Divine Butler, but rather so that we can know—however tentatively—that we are never alone in our experience.

The morning will come. Longstreet knew it. I know it. Jesus may have known it, but the morning for him ended up so different from any other morning that it changed the world. And that promise can change us, even if here, today, it is still night.

Amen.