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# The Violin String

Matthew 21:1-11, 26:36-27:66

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 17, 2011, by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

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Holy Week brings our hearts and souls face to face with the best and worst in us, the zenith and the nadir of human capability, the agony and the ecstasy of earthly experience.

The first of the great five points of Calvinist doctrine is the notion of total depravity. Total depravity doesn't mean human beings are totally evil: it simply means that we are incapable of doing good. Such good that we appear to do is flawed in both its intention and its action. What looks like altruism is in fact cleverly-disguised egocentrism. As the prayer of confession puts it, "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us." Holy Week gives us a depressing picture of this. The Lord of Glory is nailed to a cross. The disciples, called to watch, fall asleep. Judas and Peter, two of Jesus' closest companions, deny and betray him. Most of the other followers flee. The crowd demands Jesus' blood. The authorities connive for his execution. Pilate washes his hands.

But it's not as simple as that. Humanity is also capable of grace and kindness beyond our imagination. And that goodness is visible in the Holy Week story too. A woman anoints Jesus' feet with priceless perfume and prepares him for burial. Simon of Cyrene carries Christ's burden. The women gather at the cross. Joseph of Arimathea steps forward to provide a tomb. And on Palm Sunday the crowd experiences immense joy, shouting Hosanna, waving branches and spreading their cloaks on the road. There's excitement, noble service, sacrificial love, humble devotion. Humanity doesn't just touch the depths of depravity; it reaches the heights of glory. That's what makes the story so poignant – so painful. It would be so much simpler if we could simply say we were all good or all bad.

I recall one night when I was 16 years old. I attended an evening worship service at a rural church. There were refreshments afterwards. A dishevelled man appeared at the back of the hall. No one else seemed to spot him, so I went over and offered him a cookie and a few chips. He stared at me, looking through my soul and out the other side, and said, "What makes you think that's what I need?" And I knew he'd seen straight through me. He'd spotted my self-serving attempts to care about people, and exposed the hypocrite that I was. You could say he was rude, but what's politeness when it's no more than a cover for half-hearted compassion or patronizing condescension? That was a moment of conversion for me. I realized there was no point in saying I cared about poverty unless I was prepared to shape my life to match my concern. I knew that night there was no health in me.

A couple of years later I was swimming with my father in the Mediterranean when we got caught in a rip current. I'm not a strong swimmer, but my father was even weaker, and I could feel the panic of both of us being dragged down and under. And yet I never let go of him. I had the sensation we weren't going to make it to the shore, but I never let go of him. I've no idea how we made it. But I'd seen a different side of myself. I could do terrible things, and be cowardly and hypocritical. But I could also do good things, heroic things, even as a reflex when there was no time to consider the options. And ever since, I've known I was a person of total depravity and yet the occasional glimpse of surprising courage. Just like you.

On the night of March 6, 1987, a cross-channel sea ferry carrying 500 people sank in the Belgian port of Zeebrugge, 90 seconds after leaving harbor. The assistant boatswain had fallen asleep and failed to close the bow doors. The first officer hadn't been present to check the doors were closed, and the boatswain had seen the doors were open but chose not to close them because it wasn't his job. So water gushed into the open doors and the ship capsized, with the loss of nearly 200 lives. Later inquiries revealed culpability and

complacency at every level of management. Almost every dimension of human folly, fragility and depravity contributed to the disaster.

And yet assistant bank manager Andrew Parker, a passenger on the ferry that night, did a quite extraordinary thing. He saw two metal barriers, and, below, in the gap between them, he saw onrushing water. Behind him were dozens of people. So he held on to one barrier with his fists and the other with his ankles, and made his own body into a human bridge by stretching between the two barriers. Some 20 terrified people, including his own wife and daughter, climbed over him to safety.<sup>1</sup> How he found the courage and strength, how he still was rescued after laying down his life for so many, no one could say. But there was no doubt that in that disaster the world could see both ends of the violin string – the depths of human failure and the heights of human aspiration. “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13, KJV)

When you come to church on a Sunday – when you walked through these doors an hour ago – I wonder which sense of yourself you brought with you. Were you contemplating your total depravity, or your glorious possibility? I once took the risk of asking a group of churchgoers why they came on a Sunday. I turned to one of the most saintly women I’ve ever met. She looked at the floor and simply said, “For my sins. To repent of my sins.” And the rest of us, thought, “Where does that put us?” Another time I was in a prison and a long-term inmate who was inside for armed robbery said he didn’t understand why people had to be so miserable in church. “We’re not all bad,” he said, cheerfully, and I looked at him and thought, “I’m not sure about that.” But he was right. We’re not all bad. If we were, it wouldn’t be so poignant – so painful.

When you come into the presence of God, do you assume God is just like us – liable to terrible and merciless wrath, but also capable of amazing grace? That’s not what the passion of Christ tells us. We’re a mixture of good and bad, but God is good all the way down, all the time, all the way beyond forever and back. Holy Week is the story of what happens when our mixed-up lives come in touching distance of a goodness that goes beyond forever, and what happens to that goodness, and what happens to us.

The passion of Christ shows us that Jesus is stretched out between heaven and earth, between the limitless possibilities of human goodness and the fathomless horror of human depravity. Jesus’ body is stretched out like Andrew Parker’s body, between the barrier of human folly and the barrier of God’s grace. Jesus’ body is stretched out like a violin string between the two. And the name we give that agonizing stretching-out is the cross. If we were all good, it wouldn’t be so poignant. If we were all bad, it wouldn’t be so painful. We’re still God’s creation, we’re still God’s beloved, so we’re worth saving; but we’re still cowardly, cruel and crooked, so the saving costs God everything. Jesus is the violin string stretched out between heaven and earth.

And the music played on that string is what we call the gospel.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://maritime-history-two.webs.com/marinedisasters.htm>