
Pierced for our Transgressions

John 19.31-37

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 10, 2009 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

One of the most privileged and tender moments you get invited into as a pastor is to be with a person and their family at the moment of death. What I try to do is to touch the person's five senses and gently offer each one back to God. I touch their eyes and think about what those eyes have seen, their ears and reflect on what those ears have heard, their nose and savor what that nose has smelled, their mouth and dwell on what their tongue has tasted, and finally their hand and consider what their hands have touched.

I wonder if you've ever touched the skin of a person's body after they've died. It's an awesome and intimate thing to do. It's terrifying, because it makes you realize how vulnerable each one of us is, because this moment will come for us all. But it also makes you ponder the intricate wonder of this person, how all the capillaries and nerve ends and organs and brain cells that are now silent and still were once so busy and creative for so long. Our physical bodies depend on two things above all. One is water – for we're each made up of about 60% water. The other is blood – for without the blood running around our bodies, nothing would function for more than a second.

Jesus has no nursing home or hospital side ward to die in. His execution is an extended and merciless form of relentless torture. Once Jesus has died, John's gospel records a significant event. It says, "One of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out." It's an awesome event, of atonement and salvation, judgement, death and sacrifice, but it's also an intimate story of love and betrayal, physical pain and emotional heartbreak. What's going on throughout the passion narrative is an interweaving of awe and intimacy, of the grand cosmic story and the intense personal drama. I want to look tonight at how all these things appear in this brutal moment shortly after Jesus' death, when the spear pierces his side and out come blood and water.

The first strand to weave is the background of this spear story in the ritual shape of Israel's life. The Day of Preparation falls every Friday, and ends at sundown on Friday night. Passover falls once a year, on the 14th day of the seventh month of the Jewish calendar, which can be any day of the week. John's gospel points out that the day Jesus was killed was an unusual day, because the way the calendar fell it was *both* the eve of Passover *and* the day of preparation, a coincidence that only occurred every ten years or so. The fact that it was the eve of Passover meant that the blood that appeared as the soldier pierced Jesus side gushed forth just as the blood of the Passover lambs was being spilt. The fact that it was the day of preparation meant that those who had condemned Jesus wanted his body removed before the day of rest began. And all of this is told with repeated reminders that those who wanted Jesus dead could do nothing without the Romans' authority. Even the final spear thrust into Jesus' side is carried out by a Roman soldier. So already we have the grand context of sacrifice and deliverance and the earthier context of meeting legal requirements and avoiding the 24-hour sight and smell of a crucified corpse. But all of these are focused in the reality of a Roman soldier who has control over Jesus' body as surely as Rome had complete control over the land of Israel. Already we have themes of politics, personal passion, and providential purpose all converging at this moment.

And then the next strand to weave is the resonance of these events in Israel's scriptures. Most obviously we recall the words concerning the suffering servant in Isaiah chapter 53 – "He was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; ... and by his wounds we are healed." But more subtly we might reflect on the Greek word for "side," which is sometimes translated "rib." It appears only here in the New Testament and only once in the Greek version of the Old Testament. But that single place is very interesting. It's the moment in Genesis chapter 2 where God takes the side (or rib) of Adam and shapes it into a woman. The creation of Eve in Genesis chapter 2 represents not just the creation of woman, but the creation of society, of diversity, of the whole idea that human beings can share and give and pass on life to one another. So what we've got in this piercing of Jesus' side with the spear is not just the fulfilment the prophecy of the suffering servant, but also an idea that what comes out of Jesus may be the beginning of new life, a new society. When we recall Jesus' promise that from him will come streams of living water we begin to wonder if this is precisely what he was referring to.

And this invites the weaving of another strand, which we might call the significance of these events in the life of the church. What exactly is the meaning for the church of the account that out of Jesus at his death came water and blood? Water and blood... It's hard to avoid the most obvious connection of this event to the two central acts of the church's life: baptism and Eucharist. We've already seen that this moment on the cross is like Eve emerging out from the side of Adam, like a new birth – almost a new creation. Now it seems like this is like the birth of the church at the moment of Christ's death – and in its birth it's given the two sacraments that shape its life, the water of baptism and the blood of holy communion. Just a few verses earlier Jesus has commended his mother to the beloved disciple and the beloved disciple to his mother with the words "Woman, here is your son," and, "Here is your mother." So here at the cross we're witnessing the foundation of the church, with a new community, a new birth, and new sources of life.

And that brings us finally to the last strand in understanding what the piercing of Jesus' side and the blood and water are all about. I've talked a bit about blood and I've talked a bit about water. I want to talk a little about the word "and." John's quite fond of the word "and." In John chapter one we get word *and* flesh, grace *and* truth. In John chapter two we get water *and* wine. In John chapter three we get spirit *and* truth. You get the idea. Here we get "blood *and* water."

I believe that "and" is the clue to how we're to interpret Jesus' life and how to interpret Jesus' death. Remember what I said at the beginning about what it's like to touch a dead body. You get the delicate intimacy of realizing you are close to the vulnerability and fragility of another human being, maybe one you deeply loved. But you also get the shiver of awe that this is death, cold, numbing, unavoidable death, and it's as scary close up in flesh and blood as it is far away in the language of oblivion and judgement. Well I think we can take these twin feelings to this moment of the death of Jesus. There's water – there's the way Jesus' death gives life, gives hope, gives trust in the promises of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit. And yet there's also blood – there's pain, and horror, and brutality, and ugliness, and violence, and deep, deep fear. And John's account says "*at once* blood and water came out." In other words they came out together. The cross is about water *and* blood.

And the same is true if we look back at Jesus' life through the lens of his cross. There's water – there's fountains of life, living water, healing, forgiveness, joy and gladness. But there's also blood – there's hostility, betrayal, hatred, pain, adversity, and finally what looks very much like defeat. On Good Friday it's easy to make one of two mistakes – to look just on the watery Jesus, who saved us from our sins and made everything right between us and God, or to look just on the bloody Jesus, who suffered in agony and at the last believed God had forsaken him. That's why the *and* is so important.

Which is why the last strand in understanding the water and the blood of Jesus' pierced side is the kind of life you and I are to live in faithfulness to the moment of Jesus' death. We could live a life that airbrushes out the blood, and just sees the water – a sunny life that insists everything always turns out for the best, that won't tolerate gloom in ourselves and chases it out of everyone else, that fits the Jesus story into a positive and upbeat outlook on the world. Or we could live a life that airbrushes out the water, and just sees the blood – a life of struggle, and anger, and bitterness, and a recognition that there really is hatred and enmity in the world and death comes to us all. But to follow the savior from whose side at once came water *and* blood is to believe *both* that suffering and death are real *and* that Jesus' death and resurrection have transformed suffering and death so that they no longer have the last word. Because of the blood, what we see taking the place on the cross is terrifying: it's real human death. But because of the water, we can look upon it with hope, and not have to turn away our eyes in fear and despair. It's not the end of the story.

And so now that we've learned how to look at the glory and horror of the cross, look with me at the most agonizing sight in your own life. Look with me at what you've brought about by your own foolishness, at what you can't put right for all your attempts to ignore it or deny it or distract from it or resolve it. Dare to look with me, this one most truthful night of the year, at what you dare not look at very often, the truth about yourself, your life, your love, your fear, your faith. And this one night look with the searing honesty brought about by Christ's blood and the unflinching courage brought about by Christ's water. Bring with you the tender intimacy of your own closeness to whatever it is and the profound awe of how it connects to the suffering of Christ. And dare to stay in that still place, a place of awe and intimacy, a place of water and blood, a place of

grace and truth. This is the place of the *and*. In a couple of days we'll fling wide the doors and feel the joy of glory. But right now stay in the place of the *and*.

This *and* is the overlap between water and blood. It was a place the disciples couldn't occupy, which is why they scattered at this crucial moment and weren't around to witness the scene. They scattered because they wanted reality to be all water, and when they saw the blood, they turned to fear and despair. But the heart of being a Christian lies staying still right in this moment, where water and blood come out together. Being a Christian means remaining in the place where hope and suffering meet. This place, the place of water and blood, is the place where faith and fear overlap. It's maybe the most difficult place to be. But this is the place where the church was born. And this continues to be the place more than anywhere else where the church still belongs. The church is and always has been most truly itself not when soaring in success or when plunged in despair but when success and despair are mingled like water and blood. That's the place where we've gathered around tonight. It's a place of conflict, horror, and agony, but also of new birth, new community, and new sources of life. This place has a name. It's called the foot of the cross.