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# Many a True Word

Matthew 27.35-44

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 2, 2010 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

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The film *Priest* introduces us to Fr Greg, a young and rather earnest Catholic priest, new to parish ministry. The movie centers around two issues that torture and dominate his life. The first is that he's gay. Finding no legitimate outlet for this emerging part of his identity, he begins a secret relationship with a man he meets in a bar. The second is that he hears the confession of a teenage girl called Lisa. He learns that she is regularly being intimately abused by her father. Later the father comes to confession too, and the priest is horrified to realize that this man bears scarcely any remorse for what he is doing. The seal of the confessional means Fr Greg cannot communicate this information to anyone. But he struggles with that fact just as he wrestles with his own sexual identity. The power of his ability to pronounce or withhold forgiveness feels like nothing compared to his powerlessness to stop this terrible domestic tyranny. The two traumas of his life come to a crisis at much the same time. He faces the humiliation of being arrested for behaving improperly with another man in a public place. He has the book thrown at him by his bishop, and is forced to leave the parish. Meanwhile the truth of Lisa's domestic ordeal suddenly comes to light. In a harrowing scene, Lisa's mother emerges from an angry crowd, and, squaring up to Fr Greg, with a tearful, bitter and unforgiving gaze, says to him "You knew." Fr Greg has no idea what to say. Lisa's mother, now in disbelief and with her fury momentarily diverted from her husband and focused on her fragile and despised priest, says, vengefully, "You *knew*."

This is the church Jesus died for. A church with lots of rules designed to keep us just and make us holy. Sometimes those rules are such that, try as we might, we can't keep them. Other times those rules are ones the keeping of which opens us to bitterness, fury, and even hatred. The movie shows us both dimensions in the life of Fr Greg. Either way the church is exposed to public hatred and ridicule.

Public hatred and ridicule is the way the people of Jerusalem receive Jesus' crucifixion. Everything around the cross happens in threes. There've been three predictions of the passion earlier in the gospel. Then Jesus makes three predictions of who'll betray him – first Judas, then all the disciples, then Peter. Jesus prays three times in Gethsemane. Peter denies Jesus three times. After Jesus dies, three kinds of witnesses cluster around him: the soldiers, the women, and Joseph of Arimathaea.

Here at the foot of the cross, there are three kinds of mockers. The first are the passers-by, who say, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." Then there are the chief priests, along with the scribes and elders, who say, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son.'" Finally there are the bandits who are crucified with him who taunt him in the same way. This threefold taunting at the climax of Jesus' ministry echoes the threefold temptation at the outset of his ministry. In case there's any doubt of the connection, we get the same phrase used on both occasions – "If you are the Son of God." Both the devil and the mockers goad Jesus with his apparent inactivity. Surely a real divine being would offer fireworks and spectacle, not silent resignation? Come on Jesus, you can do better than this! How can you be the Messiah if you do nothing?

But the secret of the crucifixion scene is that there's many a true word spoken in jest. Between them this array of mockers gathered around Jesus succeed in summarizing and affirming pretty much every truth the Gospel of Matthew seeks to communicate. Let's take them one by one.

The passers-by say, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days." There's two ironies here. One is that this of course is exactly what Jesus is about to do – have his body destroyed and rebuilt in three days. The other is that the temple seemed the most indomitable feature of Israel's life. It had been destroyed once upon a time and it had taken a hundred years to rebuild it. It had been severely damaged later and had taken two hundred years to restore the second time. By the time Matthew's Gospel was written, it had been

destroyed a third and final time.... But Jesus was very much alive. The mockers take for granted that the temple is permanent and Jesus is transitory. It turns out it's the other way round.

The passers-by continue, "Save yourself and us." But Jesus has already said, "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." There's almost nothing the mockers can say that Jesus hasn't anticipated in his public ministry.

Both the passers-by and the temple authorities say "If you are the Son of God," and "He said 'I am God's Son.'" But the ironic truth is, nowhere in the Gospel of Matthew does Jesus describe himself as the Son of God. The angel says it, the voice from the cloud says it, the centurion at the cross says it – but Jesus never says it. Somehow the mockers have intuited something Jesus has never said, and in trying to deride him they are in fact speaking a true word in jest.

Then the passers-by say, "Come down from the cross." But Jesus has already said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Once again, the mockers simply highlight the gospel Jesus has already proclaimed.

Of all the ironic statements at the foot of the cross, the most poignant are the words of the temple authorities, who say, "He saved others; he cannot save himself." This perfectly sums up the story that Matthew tells. It's a double irony because the authorities think the joke's on Jesus, and that they're identifying the irony that Jesus can't do for himself what he can do for others. But meanwhile what they *can't* see is that the joke is finally on them, because first of all they've been drawn into identifying that Jesus has *indeed* saved others, a major acknowledgement for them to make, and secondly that there's something unique about Jesus that makes both him and his suffering different from others. And that pretty much sums up the gospel. Jesus saves us but at terrible cost to himself.

When you look at your life, whether you're a religious authority, a convicted criminal, or a passer-by, what do you see? Do you see a mockery of Jesus? That's what Fr Greg saw in the movie. He saw a bunch of well-intentioned rules, designed to guide people on the right path and restore them when they went astray. But the rules designed to keep him on the path he found he couldn't keep, and the rules designed to restore his parishioners when they strayed seemed to make him powerless when he most needed strength. Lisa's mother pointed her finger at him when he was down, with all the uninhibited hatred the mockers aimed at Jesus on the cross. "For a moment there I almost trusted you, I almost believed in you, you useless, pretentious, hypocritical creep."

Our lives are indeed a perpetual mockery of Jesus. Our work is a parody of the self-sacrificial other-centered example of our Lord. Our relationships are a parody of the mutual-indwelling abiding trust of the Trinity. Our discipleship walk is a parody of the disciplined fraternal correction and compassionate forbearance Jesus commends. Our mission is a parody of humble and constant presence among the hungry, the naked, the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner. Our congregational life is more like a squabble between self-righteous elder brothers than a welcome reception for prodigal sons. We are constantly at the foot of the cross, mocking the suffering Jesus.

But here's the irony. The more we mock, the truer Jesus becomes. The worse we fail, the greater grows our admiration and wonder at Jesus. The more pitiful our attempts to be faithful, the more necessary is our need for grace. The more we shout and scream at Jesus to come down from the cross, the more essential it is that he hangs there. The more we deride him and taunt him to save himself, the more we need him to save us. The more the church fails, the more we highlight the truth and urgent necessity of Jesus' person and message.

Holy Week contains two great miracles. One is obvious, the one that God did – the miracle of resurrection. The other is more subtle, and it comes right at this moment. It is the miracle of what Jesus *didn't* do. He didn't come down from the cross. He stayed there. He outlasted our hatred and cruelty and enmity. After everything we could throw at him, physically and verbally, he was still there. His endurance demonstrated the love that will never let us go. His perseverance showed that nothing can separate us from the love of God. For ever after we can connect to God, not through our striving, but through Jesus' suffering, not through our longing, but through his lingering, not through our achieving, but through his abiding.

It's not the Jesus we want. We want the Jesus that comes down from the cross, the Jesus that rights wrong, ends pain, corrects injustice, sends the wicked away empty, sets the record straight and makes all well with the world. We want answers, we want solutions, we want a technological Jesus who fixes the problems. And we want those problems fixed now. We want the Jesus that comes down from the cross. This Jesus will not come down from the cross. This Jesus bears all things, endures all things, and never ends... This is not the God we want.

But it's the God we *need*. Oh how badly we need that God! Answers, explanations, solutions – they don't give us what we fundamentally need in the face of suffering and sin. What we need is love. What we need is a wondrous love through all eternity. Sure, what we *do* is show our inability to express that love. So we wash our hands like Pilate or run away like the disciples or lose patience like Judas or settle it with a sword like Peter. And so all the more what we *need* is a love that abides, that perseveres, that remains present to us, however bad things are, for however long it takes. What we *need* is a love that sticks around, a love that stays put, a love that hangs on. That's what the cross is. A love that hangs on.

I've taken countless funerals in English working class communities, and spent many hours trying to extract from mourners nuggets of wisdom and insight to give a personal touch to a funeral sermon. Of all those cameos, the most perennial is "He was always there for you." I've long pondered this ubiquitous phrase. Does it mean he was never out when you called? Does it mean simply you can't imagine life without him? I've come to the conclusion that it means what mattered was this man's presence, his wordless permanence, his abiding touch. "He was always there for you." I used to mock this phrase as a banal cliché that had no purchase in any specific personal quality or characteristic. But I've come to understand that this invariable description of the deeply mourned, "He was always there for you," is none other than a description of the crucified God. We look at Jesus on the cross, and we say to one another, "He's always there... for you."

The end of the film *Priest* contains the most moving scene I've ever witnessed in the cinema. Fr Greg returns to the parish after his time of humiliation and exile. The anger and hatred still smolders in the neighborhood and the parish. Lisa's mother's incandescent words, "*You knew*," are still ringing in his and our ears. Lisa hasn't been seen in the church since the truth about her household came to light. The senior priest, Fr Matthew, implores the congregation to receive him back as their father in God. When it comes to receiving communion there are two stations for taking the bread, one from Fr Matthew, the other from Fr Greg. Every single worshipper at the service lines up to receive from Fr Matthew. Fr Greg stands alone, the body of Christ in his hands, totally shunned and visibly humiliated by the whole congregation. Seconds tick by and his isolation is crucifying. Somehow he has the courage and defiance to continue to stand alone – to hang in there. And then slowly but purposefully one solitary figure shuffles forward and stands before him to receive communion. It's Lisa.

Their eyes meet as she receives the communion bread. Her eyes say, "I know that you knew about my dad. But I know that you couldn't do anything about it. I understand your present powerlessness. I know it's because you believe in a greater power. You show me that by your courage in being present here right now. You're being crucified, but you're showing us a love that will not let us go."

That's the irony of the cross. If Jesus had saved himself, he couldn't have saved us. His powerlessness shows us the endurance of God. Jesus hangs on the cross to show us the love that hangs on. Hang on to that love. It will never let you go.