
The Personal is the Political

Matthew 26.14-27.66

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on March 28, 2010 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

The door of Jesus' tomb closes with the sound of an echoing silence. It leaves us with a quandary. Where is reality now? Jesus has shown us so many new things and so many true things – how can that story suddenly be over? Is reality on this side of the tomb? Here we are, with the debris of scattered coins, discarded swords, torn robes, ripped curtains, empty chalices and broken hearts. It looks like a pretty accurate, if somewhat bleak, picture of human reality. Human reality without God. And that's the resonance of that thudding closure of the tomb. We've successfully banished God. And we're left now to view the mess. And pick up the pieces. Or is there a different way to see reality? Is in fact a more profound reality truly on the other side of that door – is a force at work within that tomb that is deeper than our despair, more powerful than our perfidy, more dynamic than our disarray?

The truth is, of course, they're both reality. They're two sides of the one coin called "What's really going on." We are striving and failing to control ourselves, one another, and the world. And at the same time God is turning our clumsy and malevolent failures into his beautiful kingdom – turning death to life, sin to goodness, scarcity to abundance, sadness to joy.

In the late 1960s the second wave of the feminist movement started to use the phrase "the personal is political." What the phrase meant was that many of the choices that women made, or were denied the opportunity to make, were not simply personal choices but together constituted the heart of the way politics needed to be reimagined and reconfigured in America. Politics was fundamentally tangled up in the personal, and the personal was what the tangle of politics was all about. Issues of violence against women, of sexual health, of salary and working conditions, of the availability of affordable and high quality day-care, and of the removal of impossible beauty standards from one's life, were not private, personal questions. On the contrary they were exactly what politics was made of. Feminists taught many other minority and underrepresented groups that the key to social change was to expose and manifest the public significance of hitherto hidden and private personal struggles and sufferings.

Such an insight has become a commonplace among activists today, for example in the environmental movement. We are all encouraged to recognize that the future well being of the planet doesn't just lie in international agreements made in Rio, Kyoto and Copenhagen, but just as much in our decision to recycle our daily paper, take a bike ride to work and purchase locally-grown vegetables.

The phrase, "The personal is the political," may have been invented in the 1960s, but the idea is not new. The idea is at the heart of the passion narrative we've experienced so vividly together this morning. The power of this story is that this is *both* an account of the greatest political tragedy in history, the death of the son of God, *and* a display of the most profound and intimate personal and interpersonal moments, betrayals and interactions. That's the whole point. It's never just about God, and it's never just about us. Jesus goes to the cross because we put him there, but also because God somehow chose to let him go there. The agony of the story is not just that Jesus gives his life to save the whole world, but that he lays down his life for his friends. It is personal and political, political and personal, all at the same time, and you can never disentangle the one from the other, with the result that you can never say Jesus died for the whole world without saying at the same time he died for me, and you can never say he died for me without at the same time saying he died for the whole world.

Let's dwell on a few moments in the passion story to see how this plays out. Think about the scene when Judas kisses Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. That kiss is the most intimate, ironic form of betrayal. The act of love becomes the act of exposure. But that kiss is the most political thing Judas does in the whole story. Judas uses his personal knowledge of Jesus and his purposes and whereabouts and turns that knowledge into political power by bringing a movement that challenged the Roman and Jewish status quo to an abrupt and violent end.

Then think of what happens by the charcoal fire. Peter's personal need for warmth and his very human fear of being recognized and perhaps executed become a political changing of sides. A servant girl says "You were with the Galilean" and in the process makes the motley crew of disciples sound more like a political party. When Peter denies it he isn't just betraying his closest friend, he's putting his weight behind the Roman and Sadducean and Herodian domination of Galilee and Jerusalem.

Then look at what happens when Pontius Pilate sits on the judgement seat. This is apparently the most political moment of all. Pilate asks if Jesus is the King of the Jews; he is in the habit of releasing one prisoner to the crowd. These are patently political dimensions of the story. But suddenly it gets very personal. Pilate's wife appears and her message arrives at this most political moment with an extraordinarily personal touch: "I can't sleep, darling, I've had a terrible dream, it's been upsetting me all day. I've been dreaming about another man, not you. And the man I've been dreaming about is the man standing half naked in front of you right now. Don't kill him, please, whatever you do." It makes one wonder, did Pilate have Jesus executed out of *realpolitik*, or out of jealousy – for political reasons, or personal ones?

One could take examples from every single scene of the drama, but just to note one more, when Jesus dies on the cross, there's an agonizing irony that when he calls out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" some assume he's calling for Elijah, and placing himself in the religious and political history of Israel's prophets, while others assume he's thirsty and take his cry in a more personal way by offering him a drink on the end of a stick. Moments later the centurion looks on Jesus' dead body and concludes "This man was God's son," which sounds like a personal statement of affirmation or even faith, but when one realizes this was a Roman soldier and his Emperor claimed the title Son of God it becomes evident it's not just a personal statement but a deeply political one.

In all these and a host of other ways the passion narrative we've just heard and seen wraps our personal lives around our political existence and wraps our political existence around our personal lives. This is what the gospel does, from beginning to end.

A couple or three years ago I preached a sermon here in the Chapel about the rights and wrongs of our continued military presence in Iraq and I received a tear stained handwritten note from a person who felt it was pastorally wrong and wholly inappropriate for me to talk about politics in a place like the Chapel that was set aside for personal spiritual growth and reflection. I had no idea how to reply to her because I had no idea what gospel she was reading. Every single sentence in the passion narrative and indeed in the whole of the gospels is a political statement, but at the same time every single sentence is a personal call to transformation and response. The gospel writers have no notion of the difference between the two. And neither, we have to assume, does Jesus.

Many of you know I do a series of public interviews each year called the Deans' Dialogues, and last semester I spoke with Bruce Kuniholm, Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy, about leadership. He said his biggest challenge as a leader had been when he was an army commander in Vietnam. His company was charged with carrying out nocturnal ambushes, and his critical problem was that his soldiers kept falling asleep and so endangering their colleagues. Seems like not a whole lot had changed since the Garden of Gethsemane. I've never been so struck by the intersection of human weakness with political consequence. You can never separate the two.

To be a Christian means to follow Jesus' path to the cross in the hope of sharing with him in his resurrection. The passion narrative gives us every indication that if we follow Jesus we can expect some public acclaim but eventual rejection. We can be weighed down like the disciples by the most human needs like sleepiness in the garden and shivering cold by the charcoal fire and confused ambition over thirty pieces of silver. But we can also be called to the most transcendent gestures like Simon carrying Jesus' cross and Joseph stepping out of the shadows to offer a tomb. We can expect our closest friends to betray us with a kiss and deny they ever knew us and yet we can expect our sworn enemy, like the soldier at the foot of the cross, to be moved by our suffering and come to share our faith.

What we can't do is try to seal off parts of our lives. We can't say "This part is personal," and deny that it has any political significance. We can't say "That part is political," and thereby suppose it's immune from the call to

discipleship. The difference between the personal and the political is meaningless to God. God sees it all. God knows it all. God wants it all.

Whom do you eat with? What groceries do you buy? Who do you sit next to in church? Which route, and what method of transport, do you take to work? What literature do you read? Whom do you pray for? These intensely personal things constitute some of the most politically significant statements of our lives. Who do you know that came to this country in search of a better job? Who do you know that has had an unexpected and unplanned pregnancy? Who do you know whose daddy died in a war no one can remember the need for? These are supposed to be political questions but issues are only generalizations about people. The political is intensely personal, when we really allow ourselves to see it.

In Jesus God makes public his commitment to our personal salvation. God shows his passion for us. The Holy Week story vividly displays the costs, and the rewards of his doing so. The question is, do we have the same passion for God? Are we prepared to face what the first disciples faced in order to demonstrate it?

In the first Holy Week, Peter, Judas, Simon of Cyrene, Mary Magdalene and Joseph of Arimathaea discovered that their most personal friendships, choices and loves turned out to be the most political and dynamic dimensions of their lives. Are we prepared, this Holy Week, to make the same discovery?

If the answer to that question is “Yes,” then you’ll be entering Holy Week in the spirit in the gospels offer it. This is the week when God transforms our personal with his politics, and transforms our politics with his person. This is the personal and political good news of Holy Week: God gets fundamentally and comprehensively tangled up in our lives, so that we might be tangled up in his life forever.