



St. Paul's Church

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Belief and Unbelief

Everyone who has to contend with unbelief should be advised that he ought not to take his unbelief too seriously. Only faith is to be taken seriously: and if we have faith as a grain of a mustard seed, that suffices, for the devil has lost his game.

Karl Barth

Karl Barth, who many consider the great voice of Protestantism in the twentieth century, is not one to trivialize the things we use to make God trivial in our lives, and I am grateful for his words. There is so much in the transition into Holy Week that beggars belief, at least as we know it, but his words are full of humility; as we enter the great mystery of our faith, it is that humility that I admire, because it comes from a man who clearly has struggled with his share of it.

We tend to treat Holy Week—the procession into Jerusalem, the final meal with His friends, the madness of the arrest and Crucifixion and all that follows, as a supreme test of our faith, however we define it. It is the core mystery of who we are and so it is not enough that it is told to us. We have to live it out, share in the cognitive dissonance between our “Hosannas” and our shouts to “Crucify him,” in order for anything in the week to make sense at all. It has to include our minds bodies

and hearts, as well as our voices, in order for it to act on us the way it should. If we give this mystery anything less than our entire selves, we are cheating ourselves because it is not great professions of faith God needs; God simply needs us and our willingness to be unguarded in our entry into this mystery.

In the interest of equal time, the Roman Catholic Dorothy Day speaks of seeing “the unutterably poor who are going through their long-continuing crucifixion” in Holy Week. She says, “It is most surely an exercise of faith for us to see Christ in one another. But it is through such exercise that that we grow and the joy of our vocation assures us we are on the right path.” It is the work that is the end. The call is to see the crucified bodies of Christ in the poor, who are themselves the mystery, for “what you do for them you do for him.” Seeing Holy Week this way also involves the entirety of ourselves, not simply what we profess. We have to wash his

wounds, sit with him at table (if only in our mind’s eye this year) and call each other friends in order to really explore the mystery of this time.

As Anglicans, we are placed in the middle of these views. They are not mutually exclusive, however. We need to live-out what we profess, no matter how crazy the world seems at the moment, as we are committed to seeing Jesus in the under-resourced population we serve. We need to witness to their own crosses, to know their names and their stories. If we are worried about the state of our own unbelief as we do this, it is not a matter of overwhelming concern. God can work with faith the size of a mustard seed, which is what most of us can manage most of the time. That thought alone allows us to give ourselves entirely to the mystery of Holy Week and I hope we can all be present for it in body, mind and spirit.

Fr. Mark

Creative Mercy

Our sins are not stopping points but starting points. They can be the occasions of constantly fresh, constantly wider visions of the grace of God. It's often been said, boldly, that the saints in heaven rejoice over their sins, because through them they have been brought to greater and greater understanding of the endurance of God's love, to the knowledge that God's creative mercy still waits.

Rowan Williams

I have always loved the idea of the "creative mercy" of God. It becomes more insistent as we approach Holy Week, particularly during the Great Vigil, where we receive a personal view of the entire story of salvation stretched in front of us. We begin in darkness, the darkness of our tombs, the darkness of relationships damaged between God and each other, and we let the story of God's love and mercy work on us, softening our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. It is like watching the calling and recalling of God happen in real time.

If you are like me, creative mercy is especially appealing because it sees beyond the ways we distort the image of God in us, when we feel those parts of us so full of rot that we believe it to be hopeless. Only God and the creativity of God's work can lead us from that place. It does not mean that our sins are forgotten, only that God can find a way past them in ways we could not imagine. "Forgiveness of that sort is

creative because it reveals new dimensions to a relationship, new depths, new possibilities. It recognizes the reality of the past, the irreversibility of things, the seriousness of the damage done, but it is all the more joyful and hopeful because of that... It can look at and fully feel my weaknesses, and still say, 'I love you.'"

Generally speaking, we don't do well with forgiveness. We are so desperately aware of our need for it that we forget that God needs it too, to have wholeness within the creation God loves so deeply. Sometimes we can only experience it in dislocation. Miroslav Wolf, theology professor from Yale, talks about a Croat returning home after the Balkan wars of the 1990's to find an old woman living in his house. As he approached, she emerged in the doorway with a shotgun, "Come any closer and I'll shoot," she said. "No," said the man, "you will make me a cup of coffee." She looked at him for a long moment,

turned and went back into the house. He followed; she told him about her own destroyed house, the son who had never come back. Later when they met again, she said that he reminded her of that son. Only God can offer that kind of reconciliation in a place where we could only find brokenness.

I often tell people that the only way to understand the creativity of God's love is in attending all the services of Holy Week, understanding that it is simply not possible for many. I know a preacher who said (years ago) that if he could stop people from attending Easter if they had not been to Good Friday. I don't take attendance. I simply believe that Holy Week and all that follows it will be much fuller if we experience the creativity at the heart of God's work among us, creativity that, in dislocated times, begs to be brought out into the world.

Fr. Mark

Books

(Please note: I have decided to discuss two very different books, one new and one old, in the hope that one may find a home with us during the remainder of Lent.—Fr. Mark)

See No Stranger

Valarie Kaur (2020)

Kaur, who is a filmmaker, activist and attorney, has written a book about her spiritual journey that is part memoir, part testimony to the power of listening, even in times of deep stress and loss. She chronicles her life as a Sikh woman living in southern California from the days after 9/11, when many of her relatives were killed in “reprisals” by vigilantes following the tragedy, to the development of her voice as an advocate for the forgotten and the marginalized through the political battles of the last decade. She chronicles her visits to places like Guantanamo, at the scene of the massacre at Oak Creek, Wisconsin in 2012, where over a dozen Sikhs were shot by a white supremacist, the largest massacre in a place of faith since the bombing of the Baptist Church in Birmingham that killed four young girls. Throughout her coverage and her work, she maintains the need for listening to both victims and perpetrators as necessary to the work of reconciliation and healing. In prioritizing curiosity over judgement, she encourages us to see those we call our opponents as “Parts of us that we do not yet know.” In its intimacy and insights, it is a primer on the power of listening, both to friend and opponent.

The Cost of Discipleship

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Written in the 1937, after the Nazis had consolidated their power in Germany and commandeered the Lutheran Church as a voice of the government, Bonhoeffer’s published these arguments about “cheap” and “costly” grace in the context of our collective lives, observations that has made this book a spiritual classic. His remarks on cheap grace as the preaching of Christ without the Cross, of sacraments “sold on the market as cheapjack’s wares,” (which he maintains led to the spiritual and moral decay of the German people) have become a plumb-line by which we measure the intersection of our own religious and cultural lives. Though it is a spiritual classic, it is worth re-reading in a climate when we are given the task of understanding the meaning behind grace and how to find it in the words of the Sermon on the Mount; it is well worth the time to think about how something can be at once free and so costly. Although it is nearly ninety years old, *The Cost of Discipleship* addresses issues that the contemporary church has yet to fully contend with, especially in the context of the social justice movements in which our culture is now immersed.

Schedule of Liturgies for Holy Week

March 28	Palm Sunday	Masses at 9:30 and 11
March 31	Stations of the Cross	7pm
April 1	Maundy Thursday	7pm
April 2	Good Friday	12 noon and 7pm
April 3	The Great Vigil of Easter	7pm
April 4	Easter Sunday	9:30am Eucharist in Chapel 11am Mass in Sanctuary with Baptisms