

Good Friday is the day after Jesus was betrayed by Judas, denied by Peter and deserted by all the disciples other than John. Good Friday is two days before Jesus rose from the grave at dawn, beginning the eternal day of God’s triumph over sin and death, bursting out from the rock hewn tomb and overwhelming the sunrise of “just another day.” Good Friday is the day when God’s mercy and justice kiss. For it was His kindness toward us that moved the Father to sacrifice His own Son, but He needed to sacrifice His Son in order to satisfy His own perfect justice and thereby uphold the moral order of the universe.

We are told that Friday, on that Friday, the world grew dark for three hours as Jesus hung upon the cross. The darkness ended when Jesus cried out twice. First He cried out to His Father using the opening words of Psalm 22:1, *“My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?”* And then [there was] silence, for God gave Him no answer, nor did Jesus expect one. He knew that in that moment He was wrapped entirely in the dark wrath of His Father and all communication between Him and the Father was gone. In darkness the world waited until the silence was rent by a second great cry, in which Jesus cast the anguish of His soul against the darkness and yielded up His spirit. Through this agony God accomplished the salvation of all who would believe. It was a sufficient sacrifice.

It was then, on Good Friday, Matthew tells us, that the great curtain that hung in the temple – we read about it in Hebrews 9 – that great curtain which hung in the temple separating the holy of holies from the holy place in the temple, was torn asunder from top to bottom, no natural thing, that! And that ripping of the curtain, as we have been told in Hebrews, indicated that now the way is open for the sons and daughters of Eve to come into the presence of the Father. That is very important. Because it is inside the holy of holies that the Ark of the Covenant sits. In the Ark of the Covenant is the Law, on the top of the Ark of the Covenant is the mercy seat beneath the cherubim and it is there at the mercy seat that God said “I will meet with My people.”

But something already was profoundly wrong with that temple, something more than the corruption of the priests who used the temple as the source of immense wealth and power. You see in the temple there was no ark. It was gone. The ark had long since been lost to history most likely at the time of the Babylonian conquest and exile. So there was no ark sitting in the magnificence of Herod’s rebuilt temple. We are told in the scriptures that for forty years Herod had been building and remodeling and increasing the dramatic size of the magnificence of that temple. It was considered to be one of the architectural wonders of the ancient world. But like much else of Judaism in the days of Jesus it was all an outward show with no inward reality. Already we might say the heart of Judaism the heart of the Old Covenant was empty. For the place where the Law and mercy come together was absent from the temple. It was the first purpose of the Ark to contain the two tablets of the law given by God to Moses and by Moses to the people of God. So the Law was present within the Ark and the Mercy Seat where God agree to meet at least yearly with the high priest representing the covenant people was on the top of that Ark between the two cherubim. We know from the opening chapters of the prophet Ezekiel that the Spirit of God had abandoned the temple in anticipation of its destruction along with Jerusalem by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar. This was a destruction decreed by God on account of the corruption and ever deepening idolatry of His people. Israel had turned its back on the law of God. Consequently Israel had also turned away from the mercy of God.

If you much study scripture and have reflected on its larger sweep, particularly in the Old Testament but not exclusively, there is a seeming ambiguity about the Law. On the one hand the Law was given to Israel so that they would be a holy people for they would be a lawful people and God had created a universe ordered by law. For only

in an ordered universe can life flourish. In fact only in an ordered universe and only in lawful societies can human freedom flourish. This is one reason why now we face the continual diminishment of our freedom as the law of our land is destroyed. What is true of the physical is equally true of the spiritual. The spirit flourishes with the ordered freedom of moral law, the law which even the fallen human heart recognizes within itself and in creation and in which God specifically revealed to Moses. Of this Law, Moses specifically said, Deuteronomy 30:11-14, *“For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say,*

*‘Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.”* Again Moses wrote in Deuteronomy 32:46-47, *“Take to heart all the words by which I am warning you today, that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the words of this law. For it is no empty word for you, but your very life, and by this word you shall live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess.”* But then we read from Moses what the Lord said to him regarding the way Israel would actually go after Moses died and they entered the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 31:16-18). *“And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Behold, you are about to lie down with your fathers. Then this people will rise and whore – looking for whores, not “war” but “whore” – after foreign gods among them in the land that they are entering. They will forsake Me and break my covenant that I have made with them. Then my anger will be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them and hide my face from them, and they will be devoured. Many evils and troubles will come upon them, so that they will say in that day, “Have not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us?”’ And I will surely hide my face in that day because of all the evil that they have done, because they have turned to other gods.”* That is a description of our nation today. Our nation is turning away from the God of the Bible to the god of sex. You may think that is an innovation. Almost every single ancient idolatry focused on some kind of sexual perversion. As Solomon said, there is nothing new under the sun.

Paul says of the Law in Romans 7:7-11, *“If it had not been for the Law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’ But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.”* Here is the ambiguity of the law, that for some it is a word and guide for personal freedom and well-being while for others it is only a word for limitation and condemnation and even temptation. We find the same seeming ambiguity regarding Jesus. He comes to us as the Savior, the perfect embodiment of the love of God. But He is not received as such by all. John 3:16-21, that most precious of verses, verse 3:16: I bet everybody in this room can recite it, but I bet you can’t recite the verses that follow. Listen to them: *“For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out*

*in God.*” In his letter to the Corinthians Paul makes the same point with fewer words but no less force, 2 Corinthians 2:15-16, *“For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.”* The aroma of Christ is the aroma not just of kindness and gentleness, of patience and goodness, of love and joy and peace and of faithfulness. That fragrance is also the fragrance of self-control and holiness. There is no evil in Jesus, no sin, no corruption, no compromise, no shadowy place where we can nurse our self-pity or indulge in illicit dreams. There is no place.

There is no ambiguity in Jesus at all. Like the Law of God, the Son of God is invariable in character. That is why Jesus could say of Himself that He is the way, the truth and the life. He is unchanging and therefore utterly trustworthy. Hebrews tells us in 13:8, *“Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever.”* But there are more than a few who recoil from such invariable qualities. This is why Jesus could say of Himself those who would dissolve righteousness in the name of mercy, who would substitute human progress for divine faithfulness, who prefer approximation to divine perfections: these people will not soon welcome Jesus into their lives. He doesn’t leave them room. So, reflecting on the cross and why Jesus went there, we see that Good Friday is not exclusively the fruit of God’s mercy, though it is surely when more than any other God’s mercy is on full display. In Romans 5:6-11 we read, *“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”* I am not often given to approving of the idea of saying “Daddy” to God and “crawling up into His lap, but there is an appropriateness to it. For by His grace we have been invited into the most intimate circle of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and we are indeed woven into the eternal fellowship of the divine Person. That is a place incomparable. This indeed is the mercy of God.

Great indeed is the mercy of God, and great is our rejoicing in Him if we have receive the gift of His redeeming love. But the truth of that love, the full measure of that mercy is only found and known if we come to Him through and after having fully satisfied the unyielding Law of God. It is God’s perfect justice as much as His mercy which put Jesus on that cross. It was not simply God’s love for us that put Jesus on the cross. It was also and more profoundly Jesus love for the Father and it was the Father’s love for His own perfect justice. When we read Jesus’ word to His disciples recorded at the end of John 14:28-31, Jesus is speaking most particularly of His immanent crucifixion: *“You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I will come to you.’ If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you before it takes place, so that when it does take place you may believe. I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no claim on me, but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that world may know that I love the Father.”* Jesus goes to the Father. The road He takes goes first to the travesty and humiliation of mock trials and cruel abuse by the Jewish and Roman rulers of the day, and then through the wrath of God poured out in condemnation of sin to propitiate the honor and majesty and goodness and justice of God on the cross. Then He goes to the cold stillness of the tomb. And there He waits for the glorious morning. That is where we should wait

on this Good Friday, and contemplate over the next hours just exactly what it is that Jesus has done and why it was necessary, not for our neighbor, but for us, even as we are right now. Why was it necessary?

Please pray with me: Father, we are increasingly in a day when humanity in general has become deeply confused, no longer understanding the true meaning of law, no longer understanding therefore the need for law to restrain sin, indeed no longer understand [that] the impulses of the human heart if not restrained are always evil only according to the word of God. We have seen a little of the face of this kind of unrestrained humanity in Syria, but we know that its horrid face has been revealed here as well. We realize, our Father, that for us to persevere on the path of righteousness and peace and love for our neighbor, we must have the power of Your Holy Spirit or we will fail. We thank You for the cross in that it puts to death our sin and clears away our guilt. Now by Your grace may we not neglect to enter into the most holy place and there, in communion with You, be renewed day by day for whatever task lies before us. We ask this, our Father, in Jesus name. Amen.