

Good Friday.....

We thought it was all for the best - it was all done with the best of intentions. The news this week has, as ever had at least its share of bad and worrying news: the earthquake in Italy and its sad death toll, suicide bombings in various places, and security alerts. One story that particularly caught my attention was headlined by the radio and related to the massive tranquilizing of children within our own care system in the 1970's and 80's. The item reported enormous use of drugs, well beyond that nowadays prescribed to adults, and the fears now that this forcible and brutal drug use was producing genetic defects in the offspring of those so treated in childhood. And you ask yourself: how could this be? Generally speaking, those who have chosen a life, a career, in residential childcare have done so for the best of motives - OK there are a few exceptions, but I suspect that most of those staff involved, if confronted now with their actions then, and their possible consequences would, will, be devastated. 'We thought it was all for the best'. The series of inquiries that have followed other not dissimilar disclosures does not entirely contradict that, but has pointed to how best intentions can be undermined and distorted by circumstances, including the effect of insidious group pressures and dynamics.

One of the challenges of the Easter Passion account is to retain its human dimensions, for it is an intensely human story. Not least through familiarity, compounded by the passage of time and our own squeamishness, there is a danger that we reduce this account to something of a cartoon, a set of well-known images or collages, populated by cardboard figures, and the real, human dimension is diminished, if not entirely lost. It becomes a story with goodies and baddies, and in pantomime fashion we can be drawn into responding by cheering the goodies and hissing the baddies - if only it was so simple. It is a drama in which all involved, individuals and groups would at the time have claimed: we thought it was for the best.

We start at the beginning of this fateful day and think of the disciples, now conspicuous by their absence. A motley crew, some related to each other, but generally united only in that they had responded to the call Jesus made upon them. Faithful but fallible, probably much like us, they would not, could not be a match for professional armed soldiers when they appeared that night in the Garden of Gethsemane. Some resistance was possible, but there was the possibility that they might be seriously injured if not killed, and still lose the skirmish. Better to withdraw, regroup, and consider an appropriate strategy. After all they had been taken by surprise - if they could talk it through together they could come to a better response to make to help Jesus. Yes, run away and regroup. It may not look very good at the time, but in the long run it will be for the best.

Or we can think about the religious leaders, the High Priest and the Sanhedrin. Passover week was always a tense and difficult time. Such a crucial festival for the Jews, but one undertaken under the very watchful and suspicious eyes of the Romans. It was an uneasy understanding that had to be maintained with them, but it was so important to do that. They were the custodians of the faith, the covenants made with Abraham and the laws given to Moses. Hundreds, thousands of years might have passed; both wonderful and awful episodes had been endured, but they and their forbears had held and protected the faith. People had died for it, suffered for it - just think of all that Elijah went through - the responsibility laid heavily upon them. The faith and its festivals had to be protected, and the political and social balance was so precarious. The uproar when Jesus had come into Jerusalem at the beginning of the week had been very unsettling. Another episode like that and the Romans might do something drastic - close the Temple even - and then the whole thing could escalate out of hand. No something had to be done, even if it was unpleasant. It would be for the best.

And then there was Pilate, a man who still had his ambitions. Being Governor of Judea was hardly he hoped the jewel in the crown of his continuing career. It could have been worse though. He might have been given some bits of Gaul. They were stropky there, too, and it was cold as well! What you didn't want on your dossier in Rome was a record of disorder and uprising in your province, or if there had been some threat of it, it had to be shown that you had handled it firmly, brutally even. The Senate in Rome liked that. Sure, the concept of Roman justice had to be protected and demonstrated, it was one of the justifications for extending the Empire that these things might be taken to barbarian peoples, but essentially it was to Roman citizens that these things had to apply. Some latitude was allowed in respect of the others, especially if the peace and security of the Empire might be at threat. Negotiating with the Jews was not an easy process. Too clever by half and with sets of laws and values that were not Rome's, but which seemed to help keep an uneasy stability in the Province. So being pressed about this alleged 'King of the Jews' seemed a bit of a put-up job. If this Jesus been a Roman citizen it would have been different, but it looked as if things could turn nasty. The death of one eccentric Jew, for whatever reason, could be an acceptable compromise if this public unrest was to be settled down. It was probably for the best.

It was probably for the best - all have chorused it so. And so Jesus hangs, nailed to a cross, dying excruciatingly. Jesus, the innocent Son of God is being executed for the weaknesses of his contemporaries, for the sins of the world, for the sins of his day and the sins of our day. For our sins God himself, in the form of his Son, takes that awful and awesome punishment, and in doing so redeems and saves us, pays the price of our admission to his eternal presence, our acceptance into a relationship of love and mercy that we can barely start to understand. It is quite wonderful. It was not our idea, it was not even what we deserve. It happened and happens at God's initiative and through his grace. What more could we want. Hallelujah! It is for the best. It is the best that God could give us!