**GOOD FRIDAY MESSAGE**

Good morning. Nice to be back! So, how do we worship on Good Friday?

For on this day we remember the awful horror of an innocent man being cruelly put to death. It’s the stuff of nightmares. An X-Rated story. We’d never show it in all its gory detail on television.

I remember when my family was at home, wondering whether we should go to the Good Friday service. My reasoning was similar to that of not watching the television news when the kids were around, for fear they would find the many stories of tragedy, death, fighting and poor human behaviour too scary and frightening. I wanted to protect them from this, because I loved them.

We usually went, but I also tried to make sure that we talked about Easter Sunday and the empty tomb. Yes, remembering the crucifixion is tough, but it helps when it is told in the context of the resurrection.

This largely shaped my thinking about Good Friday worship until two years ago. My wife Judith had died just six months previously; I was still grieving and trying to come to terms with this loss when I attended the usual sombre, respectful Good Friday service, but remember becoming upset when, towards the end of it, we were reminded that the story had a happy ending, that we could look forward to celebrating Jesus’ resurrection on the Sunday.

I was upset because I was not ready for a happy ending. I identified with the women standing near the cross, watching. I was not ready to be told that all would be OK, but wanted time to let the waves of grief wash over me, to lament the passing of a much loved person, and to honour their life. And I didn’t dare let myself wonder why this had all come to pass. I wasn’t ready to come to terms with what had happened. I needed time to grieve, and not be rushed into “getting over it”.

To add to my distress, at the end of the service we sang the powerful hymn by Isaac Watts: *When I survey the wondrous cross*. This hymn had been central to me becoming a Christian, some 50 years ago. It was so meaningful to me then, yet that Good Friday morning I found I couldn’t sing it. I wasn’t ready to embrace the sentiments expressed in the hymn – to count my richest gain as loss, to pour contempt on all my pride, to sacrifice all things that charmed me most, or to give up my soul, my life, my all to God’s Amazing Love.

Instead, like the women who watched the crucifixion, I just wanted to sit at the foot of the cross and weep and mourn. I felt like screaming “I’ve lost so much, God, how can I praise you and worship you when I’m overcome by grief?”

But, just like for the women who watched Jesus die, there comes a time when it is right to move forward. Time, and the wonderful love of others, help heal the wounds of loss and give us strength to step out into the future, to start a new chapter in life, to experience the power of resurrection if you like, guided by the experience of grief. Many of us will have found this.

In preparing for today, therefore, I wondered what message I might give. I could give a theological sermon on the meaning of the cross, or explore the social and political context of the crucifixion to make it relevant to today, or focus on the sacrifice of Jesus – *no-one has greater love than this: to lay down his life for his friends*.

Until recently I was leaning towards sharing a public theology perspective that explored reasons why the establishment of the day wanted Jesus dead, on account of him challenging their traditional religious values and authority and being seen to confront the rule of Rome. But that belongs more to Palm Sunday, and Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, whereas Good Friday witnessed the grim reality of what happened next, after the die had been cast.

So I decided that today I would explore how people responded to the events of that awful day. We’ve been reminded of the response of the crowd, so I’ll reflect on the response of the women. All four gospels tell us that women witnessed the crucifixion. Matthew and Mark tell us there were many women present. What can we learn from them?

They weren’t idle spectators, feasting on the misfortune of another. Rather, they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had come up with him to Jerusalem; they included Jesus’ mother and her sister, the wife of Clopas, Salome, Mary Magdalene, and the mothers of James, Joseph and the sons of Zebedee. Luke tells us that some returned to their homes, beating their breasts. They must have loved him so much, their grief would have seemed unbearable.

Later, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary saw how and where Jesus’ body was laid. And after the Sabbath they and Salome went to the tomb, taking with them spices that they had prepared for anointing the body.

This was their way of working through the death of a loved one, of processing their grief and loss. They had no expectation of resurrection, but were with him in the time leading to his death, at his death, and then at his burial. Violent death was probably very commonplace at that time, particularly with a Roman occupying force. I don’t imagine that these women ever got used to it, though they would have been prepared for it.

I wondered whether they were afraid of death, or felt like giving up because Jesus was dead and that everything was hopeless, or that life was not worth living. We’ll never know. But what I do know is that these women were with Jesus in his last hours and I imagine that gave him great comfort as he faced his ordeal. He loved them and wept for them when anticipating the coming destruction of Jerusalem, and he commended his mother into the care of the disciple whom he loved, even while he was enduring the agony of the cross.

So over the last two years I have gradually come to see in the story of Good Friday the presence of love, co-existing alongside pain. At one level, I don’t need to be told today about the empty tomb because the story of Good Friday already points me towards the triumph of love over pain. That is what can sustain me, even in the presence of the death of a loved one, just as these courageous women engaged in acts of lovingkindness without any knowledge of the resurrection.

This fresh (for me) insight into the Good Friday narrative has helped me to move into life beyond Judith’s death. It has also helped me in another way.

Some of you may know that I am a member the Uniting Church’s VICTAS Synod Ethics Committee that was formed last year. Our first major task is to advise the Synod on the ethical issues surrounding the introduction in Victoria from June this year of Voluntary Assisted Dying.

Now this, as you will appreciate, is a very sensitive and potentially polarising topic. The Synod will decide in July how to respond to the implementation of this new legislation. It is possible, and I’m not even going to try to go into the theological pros and cons of Voluntary Assisted Dying, that Synod will support ordained ministers who choose to provide pastoral care to people engaged in such a process. In anticipation that this might happen, the Ethics Committee decided to develop a liturgy for use at such a time.

I found this extremely confronting, wondering how I would engage with, and support, someone who was planning to take the final step in the process. I feared my courage might fail me, as I might be overwhelmed by emotion at the prospect of someone’s imminent death. Too many painful memories, alongside my own fear of death.

But I then realised that these women who witnessed the crucifixion faced much the same, but they had the courage to support Jesus before, during and after his death, while knowing his death was inevitable … and that Jesus had chosen this path. Some of them may have felt very strongly that he was doing the wrong thing, others that he was doing the right thing. Yet in the midst of this theological mystery that may have polarised and frightened them, they were united in their love and support for him. I imagine he would have drawn great comfort and strength from their unconditional love for him.

What is important here for me is not to take a definitive position on Voluntary Assisted Dying, but to let love shape my action even as I struggle with grief and theological uncertainty, and to give myself time to walk gently with others through that Valley of the Shadow of Death, and to find that my cup overflows.

I find significance in the fact that the Sabbath separated the crucifixion from the resurrection: a day of rest and renewal, when the grieving women could experience God’s Shalom. And against this perspective I invite you to take time to reflect on the deaths in this last year of much loved members of this congregation – Peter, Allan, Leslie, Eileen and Geoff.

And I’m sure all of us can think of loved ones we miss, where the pain of loss is still present. For example, I remember from the time I lived here a number connected with this church who have died since I left Eden some 9 years ago – Heidi, Graeme, Lexie, Doug, Marge, John, Greg and Judith. And there are others who worshipped here, like those who came from BUPA, that I didn’t know, but whom you knew.

So I invite you now, and over the next two days, to take time to name those people precious to you whom you miss, and confess your love and grief to God. Don’t be rushed. And as you do so, may you be encouraged and comforted by the examples set 2,000 years ago in the simple acts of love of these women, and find in the mystery of the Cross and the Shalom of God the love and strength to say: *Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?* For nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.