

Sermon: 2021/04/02 ("Good Friday," Year B) - *Isaiah 52:13-53:12 & Mark 14:13-15:46_BTR*

('If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!' [1 Cor. 9:16])

You see in my hand that I brought a bow and arrows to church.

No, it's not a toy;

it's very much the real thing:

ash, maple, jute and iron.

Why?!

Well, originally I thought to bring something like a rifle to illustrate my sermon this evening, and then I thought: "perhaps not."

After all, an Englishman talking to Americans about guns?!

Yeah, that would be a chap out-of-his-depth.

And you'd be right.

(Like a frog talking to fish about swimming.)

Furthermore, someone might've called "911" on me.

And in light of the *appalling* recent events - the mass-murders - in Atlanta, Stockton, Gresham, Houston, Dallas, Philadelphia *and* Boulder, [n.1] I wouldn't have blamed that person for doing so: these are violent, vexing times.

But what's my point? -

Well, do you remember the 1989 animated musical movie, 'All Dogs Go to Heaven.' [n.2]

(Starring Burt Reynolds. Or at least his voice, that is.)

Well, let me be blunt:

they don't.

And neither do "all" men and women.

Nowhere does the Bible teach; and, more specifically, *nowhere* does *Jesus* teach that most can expect to enjoy life-after-death in the eternal paradise He called, "The Kingdom."

In fact, quite the reverse:

Only 'the Elect'.

That term is used consistently, repeatedly *throughout* the New Testament.

"ἐκλεκτούς" in Greek.

From that "root" we get modern words like "eclectic."

And certainly those who will be resurrected with Christ *will be* an "eclectic" bunch.

- 'a great multitude that no one could count,' foresees John (in *Revelation*), 'from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the

Throne and before the Lamb': [Rev. 7:9].

But what they *will* share in common - the *one* reason that *any* of them gets to stand among such a rarefied crowd is that they will have *all* repented of their sins - not just verbally, but by transformed, pious lives, trusting *not* that they could ever *earn* their place but that *Jesus* had granted them their access.

After all, reflect with me momentarily on that brief, well-known exchange between Him and Peter in *Matthew* [chapter] sixteen:

they were in Caesarea Philippi and there was a great deal of confusion among the citizens in that city as to Jesus' (true) identity - the one hidden beneath His rustic, modest Galilean exterior - "Some say 'John the Baptist', others say 'Elijah', and others 'Jeremiah' or 'one of the prophets'" [And Jesus] said to them, "But who do *you* say that I am?" [And] Simon Peter replied, "You are *the Christ*, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered... "Blessed are you, [blah, blah, blah]...I give to you the keys of Heaven..." [v.14-19a]

'[T]he keys', in other words, are shared with the Church - represented in that moment by the first Apostle, but who do they *belong* to?

Who's are they (really)?

Who has *the right* to allow others to use them?

Their owner.

The owner of the 'keys'.

Who, presumably, is also the owner of the "door" with the lock into which the 'keys' fit.

And, by extension, is the same owner of the building - 'my father's house', as Christ describes it, the one with the many rooms - into which the (aforementioned) door opens: [Jn. 14:2].

But this gives rise to a very natural question:

if He's *truly* the "owner" - of the (metaphorical) 'keys' and thus of the "door" (as you claim) why doesn't Jesus just let everyone in?!

Why did He *have* to die (to make our entry possible)? - as '[an] atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.' (As the "Good Book" tells us: [1 Jn. 2:2].)

Because we would bring Hell with us!

Our devilish *nature* excludes us.

Paul makes this clear to the *Ephesians*:

'we [are] *by nature* children of wrath'; of destructive, self-serving 'passions': [2:3].

And this reality needs to be confronted; to be *punished*.

Which is to say, *I* need to be "punished," or, to quote the prophet *Daniel's* preferred phrase - he uses it twice: 'purified, cleansed, and refined': [11:35 & 12:10].

But because I am my nature and my nature is me - I am what I am - such a process would be a *lethal* one:

I can't be removed from myself.

So a different "target" must be found - a more...robust, *divine* "target."
And here is where I need refer to my bow and arrows to explain the meaning of the Cross -

All the same principles or "*laws*" of physics I was going to observe about firing a gun apply, of course, to using a bow and arrows.

And what I want to point out is something obvious;
something that we *all* know, which is that *many* things effect the accuracy of a marksman - *whatever* he is using, *especially* over long-range, and one of those "things" is *gravity*.

Gravity "pulls" a bullet - *or an arrow* - constantly toward the ground.

It "tugs" at it, pulling it *off* course; *away* from its proper destination.

And Jesus - when *Jesus* hung *Himself* on Calvary - He was the "gravity" that pulled God's displeasure - His righteous *wrath* - from its justified target: *me*. *You*.

This is *the* point of the Incarnation:

to "bear our iniquities," just as Isaiah explained it (centuries earlier): [53:11].

[Pause.]

Of course, I once heard it said - *critically remarked* - that the emphasis evangelicals - *traditional* protestants, that is - place on the events of "Good Friday" - renders the rest of Jesus' ministry "a footnote."

And this claim, I confess - this...*disparagement* used to have me "running scared."

I felt that it was *devastatingly* true, so enlightened, so *insightful* and I had better be sure that I didn't fall into that "trap."

- The "trap" of focusing *too* intensely on the Cross as *the* central purpose - the "raison d'être," as the French would say - that somehow I neglect the miracles and the exorcisms and the sermons and so on that preceded it.

But you know what?

I don't care.

Not anymore.

The Cross *was* why Jesus came -

He was announced to the world-at-large; introduced to the crowds on Jordan's bank by His cousin The Baptist as "the *Lamb* of God": [Jn. 1:29].

(Not as a "philosopher" or as a "revolutionary.")

And everything that He did - the way He upheld Jewish custom and cleaved to the commandments, His charity, His healings - all that was merely preparation.

Necessary "preparation."

- Jesus had to *become*, you see, a suitable substitute if He was to suffer for the transgressions of all of us, and that would take *enormous* holiness.

This "holiness" was His "gravity" to which I (earlier) referred, and holiness is *action*; it's a verb.

It's not hiding away in monasteries or in remote caves (waiting to be served by others.)

He *had* to *live* a *perfect* life of *absolutely* loving God and *absolutely* loving "neighbor." [See Lk. 10:27; also Deut. 6:5]
Jesus' life before "Holy Week," in other words, was like my putting an arrow to this bow.

Don't underestimate doing so:

You can't operate this weapon-system without taking *that* step.

But this isn't the "end game."

The goal is to *fire* it at *something*.

So *praise God* that Jesus "took the hit," and intervened the way that He did; that [singing]

'[He] sought me when a stranger,
Wandering from the fold of God;
He, to rescue me from danger,
Interposed His precious blood'.^[n.3]

[An invitation to "the altar" follows.]

Footnotes:

1. See: <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/23/us/7-mass-shootings-7-days-trnd/index.html>
2. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_Dogs_Go_to_Heaven
3. 'Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing' by Robert Robinson, available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Come_Thou_Fount_of_Every_Blessing, (accessed Mar. 31, 2021).