Matthew 27:45-53: Separated, Opening up the Way, Bursting into the Grave

Good Friday Homily at St Barnabas, Pasadena, 2011

45 From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. 46 And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" 47 When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." 48 At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. 49 But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." 50 Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. 51 At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. 52 The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. 53 After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many.

As I’ve been thinking this week about the crucifixion, I’ve found that there are two or three moments from Matthew’s story of what happened, which we read last Sunday, that have kept coming back to me, partly in light of contributions people made to the discussion of that story that we had in church last Sunday.

First, there is the way Jesus takes up the words of Psalm 22, which we also read just now. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus asked. Here is the Son of God, the person who is himself God, asking how it can be that he is separated from God.

In what sense has God the Father forsaken, abandoned, his Son? It is not that God has gone away or that God is in heaven and is not looking at what is going on. One indication of this is the very fact that the Son can still speak to the Father. He can assume the Father is still there to be addressed, still there listening. The Father is there watching him be crucified. Think of the suffering that is involved for the Father as well as for the Son. I imagine the Father would wish to change places, and certainly would wish to rescue the Son from being executed. It must have been hard to resist the temptation to send a legion of angels to do so. The Son being abandoned by the Father does not merely mean Jesus losing a *sense* of God being with him in his suffering. It means God is actually not with him, in the sense of not standing by him. When someone abandons you in a situation such as this one, it means they are doing nothing to help you, nothing to rescue you.

God has abandoned God. How can that be? Is God divided from himself? Is God a split personality? Yes, God is, because this is a moment when God’s power and God’s love have to come apart. The cross is about God letting humanity do its worst to God. There are some Jews who represent God’s own people, and some Romans who belong to the Gentile world and who thus represent us Gentiles, working together to do their worst to God. And God lets them do so. But then God raises Jesus from death, to show that we have not overcome either God’s love or God’s power. We did our worst to God and God continued to love us. We killed God, and we could not have done anything that more disempowered God, but God reasserted his power. There is another sense in which God kept hold of his power even while not using it. God was still keeping the world in being, and God was about to exercise it again to raise Jesus, but God was not exercising it to rescue Jesus at that moment, because the act of love required a putting aside of power for this moment in order to love the world to the uttermost in letting it do its worst.

And what God did was effective. The second moment in the story that I have been thinking about is the way the temple curtain got torn apart, opening the way into the holiest place in the temple. Or as the passage from Hebrews 10 that we read just now puts it, Jesus opened up a new way into the Holiest Place to make it possible for us to draw near to God.

The temple had been built a thousand years before by David and Solomon. The temple wasn’t God’s idea, and it wasn’t an idea God was very enthusiastic about. God liked not being settled in one place, because he liked to be on the move, able to do things in different places, able to be accessible to his people everywhere. But David liked the idea of God having a settled place; you could always be sure of finding God there. So God gave into the idea, and they built the temple as a home for God, and it naturally had outer rooms where guests could go and also inner quarters where only the person who lived in the house went, and that arrangement also safeguarded the extraordinary, supernatural nature of who God is; God’s 2000-volt holiness could electrocute you if you got into too close contact with it. So having a house for God made God more accessible but also less accessible. God was there, but ordinary people didn’t go into God’s private rooms.

So the tearing of the curtain apart reestablished the fact that God really was accessible for everyone. It’s a particularly significant moment for people like us, who are Gentiles. We would never have gone to Jerusalem to the temple. That didn’t mean we couldn’t have contact with God; God is present everywhere. But we wouldn’t have had access to that guaranteed place where you knew God was especially present. Tearing the temple curtain down was important for us. We can go into God’s presence.

There’s a third, even stranger thing happens in Matthew’s story. At the same time as the curtain tears, dead people start getting out of their tombs and wandering about. They do it again later when Jesus rises from the dead.

You see, until Jesus came, nobody was going to heaven (nobody was going to hell either, so there’s both good news and bad news!). When you died, you died; that was it. Of course most people in the world don’t believe that. In the Bible’s world, many nations did believe there was going to be life after death. And in our world, when there are surveys of people’s religious beliefs, it’s consistently the case that they reveal that more people believe in heaven than believe in God. It’s hard to believe that death is the end. The Israelites knew it was the end. The Old Testament does not talk about a positive life after death. It was only the coming of Jesus that changed that. To be more precise, it was the dying and rising of Jesus that changed it. As Jesus’ dying opened the way into God’s private quarters, and did that for us as well as for Jews, it opened the way into the presence of God in heaven. It opened the grave. When Jesus died, he joined the rest of the dead people in the world, the rest of the dead people in history. But he went there as the one who was not destined to stay there and who could tell people who had belonged to God that they were not due to stay there. God’s resurrection of Jesus then proved this was so. It completed the process of opening the grave. Jesus bursts a hole in the walls of the realm of death and makes it possible for anyone else to follow him, if they want to. Mostly that is what will happen at the End, when we all leave the grave together. But the guys in Jerusalem won’t wait. They burst out now, even when Jesus dies and then when he rises, because they know that Jesus’ dying and Jesus’ rising is what makes it possible.

When Jesus dies, it means human beings have done their worst to God, and God has refused to let that be the end of his exercising his love and his power, and demonstrating it to us. When Jesus dies, it means he opens up the way into God’s presence for us. When Jesus dies, it means he goes to the grave and bursts it open for us.