

## FRIDAY'S CHILD

All Saints', Friern Barnet  
Good Friday, March 25<sup>th</sup> 2016

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'Say this city has ten million souls,  
Some are sitting in mansions, some are living in holes:  
Yet there's no place for us, my dear, there's no place for us.

Once we had a country and we thought it fair;  
Look in the atlas and you'll find it there:  
We cannot go there now, my dear, we cannot go there now

Came to a public meeting, the speaker got up and said:  
"If we let them in, they will steal our daily bread";  
He was talking of you and me, my dear, he was talking of you and me

Thought I heard the thunder rumbling in the sky;  
It was Hitler over Europe saying: "They must die."  
We were in his mind, my dear, we were in his mind.

Saw a poodle in a jacket, fastened with a pin.  
Saw a door opened and a cat let in:  
But they weren't German Jews, my dear, they weren't

German Jews

Stood on a great plain in the falling snow,  
Ten thousand soldiers marched to and fro;  
Looking for you and me, my dear, looking for you and me.'

W.H.Auden wrote those menacing lines in March, 1939. They were indeed clairvoyant. I wonder if Auden looked back to see just how prescient his words had turned out to be? Already hints of the future Holocaust or Shoah are there. Just one read of *The Diary of Anne Frank* or *The Boy In the Striped Pyjamas* shows how clairvoyant Auden was.

Now I begin with the Jews advisedly. For we're never quite sure how to deal with the Jews on Good Friday. In this neighbourhood I imagine that truth takes on an even greater depth than in some other places, remembering the greater predominance of Jewish people. I say Christians don't always know how to deal with Jewish people simply because the evangelists suggest very powerfully –perhaps with some degree of exception in St Matthew – the evangelists are clear that the Jewish authorities were the key perpetrators of the crime that took Jesus to his death. Indeed, Caiphas, the Jewish high priest, is even quoted as saying that 'it is expedient that one man should die for the people.'

But what is easily forgotten, of course, is that Jesus was unequivocally and inescapably a Jew himself. But, on Good Friday, it is easy to read back into the New Testament a very modern interpretation of the narrative. That reading almost marks out the followers of Jesus – and indeed Jesus himself - as a different race – almost prototype members of the Church. Now, in these days when followers of Christ see themselves ever more 'self-consciously' as *Christians*, so we easily read back into the gospels a perception of

Jesus' followers as a separate race. Like the western movies of old with *Cowboys and Indians*, so here it is *Christians and Jews*.

But the truth is that Jesus was indeed a Jew – to use St. Paul's terminology, 'circumcised on the eighth day, a Hebrew of Hebrews.' Jesus was a classical son of the Jewish nation. His mission was to help the Jews – and eventually all humanity, we would say - to return to the God who created and redeemed them. In fact, why else would the early Church have been determined to keep the Old Testament as an integral part of its canon of Scripture if Jesus was not a Jew? This was why that most powerful of all Isaiah's four songs of the 'suffering servant' were put to work so clearly in the gospels. They have been immortalised further by their setting in Handel's *Messiah*: 'He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. He was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities.'

In our contemporary world, many attempts have been made to redress this terrifying imbalance against the Jews, an imbalance which itself has sown the seeds of anti-Semitism. So, we now pray specifically in the solemn collects for Good Friday for 'God's ancient people, the Jews.' It is an essential and encouraging turnaround, but does it really take us to the heart of this most solemn of all days? For not only is the narrative of Jesus' death misunderstood as a naïve but terrifying crusade of Christians against Jews – as if they were two - separate nationalisms. The truth goes deeper still. It's captured incomparably in one of Cranmer's greatest collects, the Collect for today, Good Friday. Listen to its cadences; and I deliberately leave them in their Elizabethan language:

'Almighty God, we beseech thee graciously to behold this thy family, for which our Lord Jesus Christ was contented to be betrayed, and given up into the hands of wicked men, and to suffer death upon the cross, who now liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.'

Amen

'Today, then, is about, *this thy family*, that is *the entire human race*. If there is guilt to be shared, or more positively redemption to celebrate, it is the redemption of the entire human race. Good Friday is indeed a day fraught with the ambiguity of human nature, of our failure to love by the grace and light given to us. However, from this issues a salvation unimaginable before the advent of Jesus' passion and death. It is captured sharply in that second reading, from the Letter to the Hebrews:

'Ours is not a high priest unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but one who has been tested in every way as we are, yet without sinning.'

Or remembering the Exsultet, the anthem sung as we celebrate Christ's resurrection. '*O felix culpa*' O happy fault which won so great a redemption.

Jesus is the prototype, the eternal model of the new humanity in God. 'Friday's child is loving and giving'. *Jesus is Friday's child, to infinity*, loving and giving without end. Many years after he had written that poem with which I began, W.H.Auden wrote another, this time rooted in the life and death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed, ironically for tyrannicide. Auden called that poem *Friday's Child*. The last two stanzas capture perfectly today, *Good Friday*, as we behold *all God's family*:

‘Meanwhile a silence on the cross,  
As dead as we shall ever be,  
Speaks of some total gain or loss  
And you and I are free

To guess from the insulted face  
Just what Appearance He saves  
By suffering in a public place  
A death reserved for slaves.’  
Amen

Readings

Isaiah. 52. 13 - 53 - end

Hebrews. 4. 14-16, 5. 7-9.

John. 18., 19 – end.