

GOOD FRIDAY      THE REV CHARLES HUFFMAN      APRIL 10, 2009

THE OLD ADAGE THAT “FAMILIARITY BREEDS CONTEMPT,” CAN ALSO READ, “FAMILIARITY BREEDS INDIFFERENCE.” THINGS AND PEOPLE CAN BECOME SO FAMILIAR, THAT WE TAKE THEM FOR GRANTED. WE TEND TO IGNORE AND EVEN DEMEAN THEIR TRUE WORTH AND SIGNIFICANCE. WHICH, OF COURSE, IS WHAT JESUS HAD IN MIND WHEN HE SAID, “A PROPHET IS NOT WITHOUT HONOR EXCEPT IN HIS OWN COUNTRY.”

GOOD FRIDAY IS A TIME FOR US TO REALIZE THAT THE CROSS, AS A CHRISTIAN SYMBOL, TOO EASILY PASSES FROM OUR SERIOUS CONSIDERATION TO EASIER, SOFTER REALITIES.

SOME YEARS AGO I SAW A “SCHLUMBERGER CROSS OF GOLD” WITH DIAMONDS AND RUBIES, ADVERTISED BY TIFFANY & CO FOR SOMETHING LIKE \$10,000. ONE WONDERS IF A JEWELLED REPLICIA OF AN ELECTRIC CHAIR WOULD FETCH SUCH A PRICE.

GOOD FRIDAY IS A GOOD TIME TO RECALL THE WORDS OF GEORGE MACDONALD, MENTOR OF C.S.LEWIS, THAT “JESUS WAS CRUCIFIED, NOT IN A CATHEDRAL BETWEEN TWO CANDLES, BUT ON A CROSS BETWEEN TWO THIEVES.” ST. PAUL, WRITING TO THE CORINTHIANS SAID, “HE WOULD PREACH ONLY CHRIST, CRUCIFIED. TO DO SO, HE KNEW, WOULD BE “A SCANDAL TO JEWS, AND FOLLY TO GENTILES.” (1 COR1:23). PAUL KNEW THAT AN EDUCATED GREEK WOULD INTERPRET CHRIST CRUCIFIED AS A BARBARIC, PRIMITIVE IGNORANT CONCEPT.

IN A SPEECH IN THE ROMAN FORUM, 100 YEARS BEFORE CHRIST, THE GREAT ORATOR CICERO DECLARED, “THE VERY NAME OF THE CROSS SHOULD NEVER COME NEAR THE BODY OF A ROMAN CITIZEN, NOR EVEN ENTER INTO HIS THOUGHTS, HIS SIGHT, OR HIS HEARING.” “THE CROSS,” CICERO MAINTAINED, “WAS THE MOST CRUEL AND REPULSIVE FORM OF DEATH PENALTY, A SYMBOL OF SHAME AND DISGRACE, INTENDED FOR SLAVES AND SEDITIONISTS.”

TO A DEVOUT JEW ON THE OTHER HAND, "CHRIST CRUCIFIED" WAS BLASPHEMOUS--AN OXYMORON! DEUT.21:23 SAYS, "ANYONE HANGED ON A TREE IS CURSED BY GOD." GOD'S CHOSEN ON A CROSS?--UNTHINKABLE!!!!

AN INSCRIPTION IN ROME, UNDER THE OLDEST CRUCIFIX IN EXISTENCE FROM THE 3RD C., PORTRAYS THE CRUCIFIED WITH AN ASS'S HEAD. THE SARSCASTIC SCRIBBLE READS: "ALEX-ARMENOS WORSHIPS HIS GOD." THIS ANCIENT GRAFFITI UNDER-SCORES THE CONTEMPT AND RIDICULE WHICH A "CRUCIFIED GOD" BROUGHT FORTH AMONG BOTH JEWS AND GENTILES.

YET PAUL SAID HE WAS "NOT ASHAMED OF THE CROSS OF CHRIST" BECAUSE, IN SPITE OF ITS INCOMPREHENSIBLE SHAME AND STIGMA, "IT IS THE POWER OF GOD FOR SALVATION." IN THE CRUCIFIED CHRIST PAUL SAW THAT THE WEAKNESS OF GOD IS REVEALED AS THE STAGGERING POWER OF GOD TO SAVE. THERE, WITH DRIED ROMAN SPIT ON HIS FACE, LOOKING LIKE SOMETHING OUT OF A SLAUGHTER HOUSE, IS "THE FOOLISHNESS OF GOD AND THE WEAKNESS OF GOD" WHICH IS WISER AND STRONGER THAN THE GATES OF HELL.

A VICTORY, NOT DEFEAT, TOOK PLACE THAT AFTERNOON, SO LONG AGO AND SO FAR AWAY. GOD OPENED A DOOR THROUGH THE DARKNESS OF EVIL AND DEATH THROUGH WHICH WE MAY SAFELY ENTER INTO THE PRESENCE OF GOD. WE CALL THIS VICTORY THE "ATONEMENT". JESUS DIED FOR OUR SINS-- FOR THOSE THINGS WHICH PREVENT US FROM GOING THROUGH THAT DOOR ON OUR OWN, THINGS THAT, BY OUR OWN EFFORTS, KEEP US FROM BEING "AT ONE" WITH GOD. THIS IS THE COSMIC MEANING OF THE CROSS, THAT THE CROSS OF CHRIST IS THE DOOR TO LIFE FOR HUMAN-KIND.

JESUS SAYS HE IS THE WAY, THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE. HE IS BOTH THE WAY, AND HE SHOWS US THE WAY. THE CROSS SHOWS US THE WAY TO REACH THE DOOR TO LIFE. IN THAT RESPECT THE CROSS ACTS SOMETHING LIKE A GYROSCOPE.

A GYROSCOPE IS AN INSTRUMENT OF BALANCE. WHEN IT IS TIPPED ONE WAY OR THE OTHER, IT EXERTS A FORCE TO BRING IT-SELF BACK IN BALANCE. THE GYROSCOPE ENABLES A SHIP OR PLANE TO KEEP ON COURSE IN THE MIDST OF CROSS CURRENTS-- TO RIGHT ITSELF WHEN WIND OR WAVES UPSET IT'S BALANCE.

THE CROSS EVENT IS THE BALANCE IN OUR SPIRITUAL LIFE. THE CROSS EVENT HELPS US GO IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION IN A PERILOUS, TOPSY-TURVY WORLD. THE CROSS EVENT PREVENTS US FROM TIPPING TOO FAR TO ONE SIDE OR THE OTHER, REMINDING US NOT TO GET SO ABSORBED IN GOODNESS THAT WE FORGET THE POWER OF EVIL, AND AT THE SAME TIME, NOT TO GET SO ABSORBED IN EVIL THAT WE FORGET THE POWER OF GOODNESS.

IF ANY OF US COULD WITNESS WHAT ACTUALLY TOOK PLACE ON THAT FIRST GOOD FRIDAY, WE WOULD BE UTTERLY AGHAST AT THE STARK HORROR OF IT ALL.

SIXTY-FOUR YEARS AGO LAST WEEK WE LIBERATED THE DEATH CAMPS IN EUROPE. THE SHOCK OF WHAT OUR SOLDIERS SAW WHEN THEY ENTERED THOSE PLACES OF EVIL WOULD COMPARE IN HORROR TO A ROMAN CRUCIFIXION SCENE. FROM THE DAYS OF JESUS' EARLIEST BOYHOOD, THE MAIN ROADS OF PALESTINE WERE LINED WITH CROSSES ON WHICH MEN WERE HUNG, STARK NAKED AND LEFT TO STARVE TO DEATH OF HUNGER, OR PERISH OF THIRST IN THE BURNING SUN, SUFFICATING FROM THE WEIGHT OF THEIR OWN BODIES ON THEIR LUNGS.

ADDED TO THIS PICTURE OF PHYSICAL HORROR IS THE MASSIVE INJUSTICE OF THE SCENE. THAT HUMAN BEINGS WOULD STOOP TO THE TORTURE OF CRUCIFIXION IS BAD ENOUGH, BUT IT BECOMES EVEN WORSE WHEN YOU REALIZE JUST WHO WAS BEING CRUCIFIED THERE. WHAT ON EARTH HAD A MAN LIKE JESUS OF NAZARETH DONE TO DESERVE THIS? BY ALL STANDARDS HE HAD LIVED AN ABSOLUTELY WORTH WHILE, CONSTRUCTIVE LIFE. WHERE, THEN, WAS HUMAN JUSTICE? WHAT HAPPENED TO THE RULE OF LAW OF WHICH ROME WAS SO PROUD? WHAT HAPPENED TO THE SENSE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS THAT WAS THE CROWN OF PROPHETIC JUDAISM?

RIGHT HERE IS THE BOTTOMLESS HORROR OF THE CROSS EVENT. IN A PERIOD WHEN ROMAN JUSTICE WAS SUPPOSEDLY THE MOST HIGHLY DEVELOPED, AND IN THE VERY CITADEL OF GOD'S CHOSEN PEOPLE, A MAN LIKE JESUS WAS PUT TO DEATH BY CRUCIFIXION, THE MOST CRUEL FORM OF EXECUTION EVER DEVISED BY MAN! WHAT CAN THIS MEAN EXCEPT THAT THERE IS A SINISTER AND PERVASIVE POWER OF DESTRUCTION ABROAD IN

OUR WORLD TO WHICH WE ARE ALL VULNERABLE! IT IS INCREDIBLE JUST HOW LOW HUMAN BEINGS CAN STOOP!

THERE IS A DEPTH OF DARKNESS EMBEDDED IN OUR EXISTENCE THAT IS OVERWHELMINGLY FRIGHTENING. IF THE CROSS EVENT SAYS ANYTHING TO US ABOUT LIFE, IT LITERALLY SCREAMS: "HERE IS WHAT WE HUMANS ARE CAPABLE OF!" "HERE IS THE ABYSS OF DARKNESS THAT LURKS IN EVERYONE AND IN EVERY PLACE!"

BACK IN 1859 CHARLES DARWIN PUBLISHED HIS MONUMENTAL WORK ON EVOLUTION CALLED THE ORIGIN OF THE SPECIES. BY 1880 BIOLOGICAL OBSERVATION HAD BECOME "PHILOSOPHICAL OUTLOOK" AND THE WESTERN WORLD SUBSTITUTED THE IDEAL OF INEVITABLE PROGRESS FOR THE INSIGHT OF THE CROSS. IT WAS TAKEN FOR GRANTED THAT THE INEXORABLE MOVEMENT OF THINGS WAS UPWARD AND THAT THE WORLD WAS AUTOMATICALLY BECOMING BETTER AND BETTER. THE 20TH CENTURY WAS BORN IN A MOOD OF UNPARALLELED OPTIMISM. IT WAS THE GOLDEN AGE OF WHICH MEN HAD ALWAYS DREAMED, THAT UTOPIA WHERE EVIL WOULD GRADUALLY DISAPPEAR BY THE PROCESS OF NATURAL SELECTION. AND PEACE AND BROTHERHOOD WOULD HOLD UNIVERSAL SWAY.

WORLD WAR I CAST A SHADOW OF DOUBT ON THIS VIEW OF THINGS, BUT IT TOOK ADOLPH HITLER AND THE GAS CHAMBERS, AND THE ATOMIC BOMB, AND VIET NAM, AND GENOCIDES, AND 9-11, AND SUICIDE BOMBERS TO SHATTER THE ILLUSION COMPLETELY. WHO COULD BELIEVE THAT SUCH ATROCITIES COULD OCCUR IN OUR ENLIGHTENED AGE?

TO BE SO NAIVE IS TO FORGET THE CROSS AND ALL IT HAS TO SAY ABOUT THE HUMAN CAPACITY FOR EVIL. THERE IS A SPIRITUAL ENEMY--SOME DARK, ELUSIVE MYSTERY OF INIQUITY--THAT HAS NO OTHER PURPOSE THAN TO DESTROY US. WHERE IT COMES FROM WE DO NOT PRECISELY KNOW, EXCEPT TO SAY THAT THE MOMENT GOD GRANTED FREEDOM TO HIS CREATURES, THE POSSIBILITY OF EVIL WAS OPENED. THERE IS TRULY A MYSTERY TO EVIL'S ORIGIN AND MODE OF OPERATION, BUT THERE IS NO MYSTERY ABOUT ITS PRESENCE OR ITS POWER. IT CAN TURN MEN INTO SAVAGES AND PLUNGE US INTO UNBELIEVABLE DEPTHS OF DESTRUCTION. JUST LOOK AT THE CROSS, AT WHAT DESCENT, ORDINARY PEOPLE DID TO THE

FINEST MAN WHO EVER LIVED, AND THEN SAY TO YOURSELF, "THIS COULD HAPPEN TO ME OR TO SOMEONE I LOVE." EVIL IS NOT AN ILLUSION!

HOWEVER, THERE IS ANOTHER ASPECT OF THIS SAME CROSS- EVENT THAT IS EQUALLY SIGNIFICANT, IN WHICH THE CROSS ALSO POINTS US TO THE OTHER EXTREMITY OF THE HUMAN SITUATION. JUST AS THIS SPIRITUAL GYROSCOPE REMINDS US OF EVIL AND KEEPS US FROM TIPPING OVER INTO UNREAL OPTIMISM, THE CROSS ALSO REMINDS US OF GOD'S GOODNESS AND KEEPS US FROM TIPPING OVER INTO TOTAL DESPAIR.

THE SAME CROSS THAT FRIGHTENS US ABOUT THE POSSIBILITIES OR DARKNESS ALSO ENCOURAGES US ABOUT THE POSSIBILITIES OF LIGHT, FOR LOOK AT WHAT GOD DID WITH THE LOWEST POINT IN HUMAN HISTORY. INSTEAD OF IGNORING THE CROSS AS A BLIGHT TO BE FORGOTTEN, OR GIVING UP ON HUMANITY AS HOPELESSLY INCORRIGIBLE, WE SEE GOD TAKING THAT EVENT AND FASHIONING IT INTO HIS CHIEF MEANS OF REDEMPTION. IT IS NOT IN SPITE OF THE CROSS, BUT THROUGH THE CROSS, THAT GOD IS WORKING TO RECONCILE THE WORLD UNTO HIMSELF.

THIS IS THE BREATHTAKING VISION OF GOD'S SAVING POWER AND INGENUITY. HE IS ABLE TO USE EVEN THE WORST, TO ACCOMPLISH THE BEST. THE CROSS WAS EVIL'S OWN WEAPON, THE MOST LETHAL OF ALL ITS SWORDS OF DESTRUCTION. BUT GOD WAS ABLE TO TAKE EVEN THAT AND TRANSFORM IT INTO A SWORD OF THE SPIRIT, WHAT PAUL CALLS, "THE POWER OF GOD UNTO SALVATION." WE COULD HARDLY COPE WITH THIS EXISTENCE OF OURS WITHOUT SUCH AN IMAGE OF THE LORD OF HISTORY.

WE MAKE SO MANY MISTAKES; WE USE OUR FREEDOM SO RECKLESSLY AND SINFULLY; WE ARE SO BLIND TO THE GOOD AND THE TRUTH AND THE RIGHT; YET GOD CAN TAKE ANY SET OF CIRCUMSTANCES WHICH WE CREATE IN OUR FREEDOM AND FORGE THEM INTO INSTRUMENTS OF OUR REDEMPTION. WHAT HE DID WITH THE CROSS IS THE MEASURE OF WHAT HE CAN DO IN ALL THINGS.

WHAT TREMEMDOUS GOOD NEWS THIS IS, THAT GOD WAS IN CHRIST--IN THE EVENT OF THE CROSS-- THERE RECONCILLING THE WORLD TO HIMSELF.

HE IS AT WORK, NOT JUST IN THE GOOD THINGS, BUT IN THE BAD THINGS AS WELL NOTHING HAPPENS THAT IS TOTALLY EVIL OR WITHOUT PROMISE. NO MATTER HOW TRAGICALLY WE SLIP, HE DOES NOT FALL.

THE CROSS IS A SPIRITUAL GYROSCOPE. WITHOUT IT WE WOULD FOREVER BE OUT OF BALANCE AND OFF COURSE. IT REMINDS US OF EVIL WHEN WE ARE TEMPTED TO SEE ONLY GOOD, AND IT REMINDS US OF GOODNESS WHEN WE TEND TO SEE ONLY EVIL. IT KEEPS EVER BEFORE US OUR CAPABILITIES FOR EVIL, BUT EQUALLY IMPORTANT, GOD'S CAPACITY FOR GOOD.

AT ONE AND THE SAME TIME, THE CROSS BRINGS OUR HEARTS LOW IN HUMILITY AS WE CONTEMPLATE THE EVIL WE ARE CAPABLE OF DOING, BUT LIFTS OUR HEARTS HIGH WITH HOPE AS WE CONTEMPLATE THE GOOD GOD CAN DO.

LET US THEN WEAR OR CARRY OUR CROSSES, NOT WITH A "FAMILIARITY THAT BREEDS INDIFFERENCE," BUT AS A REMINDER TO MAKE THE CROSS OUR "ABIDING PLACE" LET US MAKE THE FOOT OF THE CROSS THE VANTAGE POINT FROM WHICH WE SEE LIFE AND LIVE.

On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,  
The emblem of suffer'ing and shame;

And I love that old cross where the dearest and best  
For a world of lost sinners was slain.

So I'll cherish the old rugged cross,  
Till my trophies at last I lay down;

I will cling to the old rugged cross,  
And exchange it some day for a crown.