

Homily, St. Andrew's  
Palm / Passion Sunday, March 29, 2015  
The Passion of JC according to Mark

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

“What does it mean to recall the God who was crucified in a society whose official creed is optimism, and which is knee-deep in blood?” Jurgen Moltmann asked this question in 1974, in the introduction to his book, *The Crucified God*, where he develops a theology of the cross. 10 years earlier, Moltmann had written his most known and celebrated book, *Theology of Hope*, in which he addressed what he called the “theological foundation for Christian hope [in] the raising of the crucified Christ.” He was lead to write about the flip side - “the *cross* of the risen Christ” - because of some reactions to his *Theology of Hope*, and his contention that the cross and the resurrection must be held together, for, as he wrote, “hope without remembrance leads to illusion, just as, conversely, remembrance without hope can result in resignation.” (ix)

Moltmann was among the generation of theologians who faced a crisis of faith, as they lived through the oppression of Nazi Germany, the brutality of the war, and then the growing post-war knowledge about the extent of the horrors perpetrated during the war, sometimes in the name of Christ. Post-WW2 was a time when, it has been said, “God spoke German,” since so many of the best theologians of the era were German, and many had direct experience of Nazi Germany... Dietrich Bonhoeffer died in prison, and both Paul Tillich and Karl Barth opposed the Nazi regime early on and lived essentially in exile from the mid 1930's until the end of their lives. The war and the holocaust became the backdrop for a renewal in Christian theology, with many people asking deep and spiritual questions in the face of much human cruelty.

“What does it mean to recall the God who was crucified in a society whose official creed is optimism, and which is knee-deep in blood?” In the 1940's, Europe was indeed “knee-deep in blood,” and yet the optimism of the modern world continued into the second half of the 20th century. Through the 1950's, people remained convinced that our increased knowledge of science and technology would help us to solve the problems of the world so that we would know only peace, security and prosperity. The cracks began to show, however, sometime in the early 1960's, when many walked away from religion as their primary source for meaning, pouring their energies instead into social revolution and this-worldly institutional change. Optimism continued... soared even... as our faith in science and technology, and in human knowledge and ability grew, unsullied by religious fervour. Hope remained strong that we could build a better world. And yet in 1974, Moltmann found himself asking...

“What does it mean to recall the God who was crucified in a society whose official creed is optimism, and which is knee-deep in blood?” Moltmann's question came from a very particular context, a response to his own lived history, but the question itself crosses the ages into the time of Roman imperialism in Jesus' day. When Julius Caesar's adopted son Augustus finally consolidated the Roman Empire in a victorious battle against Marc Antony, a “Golden Age” of universal peace, security and prosperity was declared and optimism reigned supreme. It was, however, a peace maintained by violent oppression and by the continued impoverishment of the masses. Not everybody was optimistic, but one dared challenge the ‘official creed’ only at the risk of one's life. It was also a society knee-deep in blood. It was into this world of great

contradiction that God was born. It was into the Roman world of peace, security and prosperity, and of violent oppression and grinding poverty that Jesus came proclaiming “the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near...” Jesus came preaching and teaching, healing and driving out demons and so the suffering people dared to hope.

Throughout the second-half of the 20th century, the cracks in hope widened as disappointments piled up. Moltmann describes briefly how “the movements of hope in the 1960s met stiffer resistance and stronger opponents than they could stand, and many abandoned their hope, either to adapt themselves, half resigned, to the usual course of events, or to withdraw themselves in total resignation.” (2) Hope took a beating as the hippies of the 1960s became the yuppies of the 1980’s... a transformation that perhaps culminated culturally when Gordon Gekko (played by Michael Douglas) famously declared that “greed is good,” in the iconic 1987 movie “Wall Street.” In *The Crucified God*, Moltmann simply and briefly describes his personal experiences of disappointment and how they drove him to consider the cross more deeply. Addressing critics who saw his movement as a ‘step backwards’ from hope to lamentation, Moltman writes of his conviction that: “unless [theology] apprehends the pain of the negative, Christian hope cannot be realistic and liberating...” His project was “to make the theology of hope more concrete...” (5)

On the cross, Jesus lamented: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” before crying loudly and breathing his last. It was the end of hope for the disciples who had followed this miracle-worker and healer, the one who had loved them and declared the time fulfilled and the kingdom of God come near. Their friend Jesus was now dead... crucified on a Roman cross like so many others before and after him. Hope was lost for God was dead.

“What does it mean to recall the God who was crucified...?” As the 20th century was coming to a close, the rock band U2 sang about the death of hope and the death of God on their 1997 album “Pop”: “Nobody else here baby; no one here to blame; no one to point the finger; it’s just you and me and the rain; nobody made you do it; no one put words in your mouth; nobody here taking orders; when love took a train headed south...” The song goes on to plead to a silent God, long since left the building: “If God will send His angels; And if God will send a sign; And if God will send His angels; Would everything be alright?” U2 pleads to the God we want to believe in... a God who makes everything alright. We want the all-powerful Creator of the Universe to fix things... to rescue us from our mistakes or simply from the difficult, painful circumstances we find ourselves in. And so with Jesus and countless others before him, we cry “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” But all we hear in response is heaven tearing down the middle as God breathes his last on the cross.

This moment of God’s death is a moment of despair, to be sure... but if we are brave enough to face it, it can also be a moment of opportunity, promise and freedom. If God is dead, if no rescue is coming, then we are free to stop waiting and to start living - living the justice and compassion of love for which so many are desperate. If God is dead and no rescue is coming, then we must take responsibility for our own lives, for our own communities and indeed for the whole world. But if God’s death is to bring this hope, then we must also remember that modern over-confidence in human knowledge, human ability and human ingenuity also ended in death for far too many. We must face the cross... because our efforts to take control and to BE God have met with just as much failure as Jesus.

Moltmann knew that “hope without remembrance leads to illusion, just as... remembrance without hope can result in resignation.” The hope in grabbing hold of our own responsibility for the salvation of the world is mere illusion if we don’t remember all the wrong we have done. And remembering all the terrible, human-made tragedies will lead only to resignation and despair if we can’t hold on to the hope that there is something more out there. And so we must find a way to take responsibility without grasping for control. If the God we hoped was in control of the world dies at the hands of human power, then trying to take control ourselves will only be a losing game. The cross of the Risen Christ beacons us to embrace our responsibility while relinquishing control. For only then, only as we follow the difficult example of Jesus letting go of being in control while embracing the power of vulnerability for the sake of love... only then will we know salvation. Only then will God’s kingdom come.

For far too many people in our world today, hope is barely memory if it is anything at all. The rise of secularism through the late 20th century and into the 21st means that few people have any ground for hope... and the failure of so many human projects to fix things means that too often despair rules. 50 years ago, Moltmann started with hope in an optimistic world knee-deep in blood and found his way to the cross of the Risen Christ. Today we live in a fearful, anxious and despairing world, a world full of crosses, still knee-deep in blood, dying for hope.

This Holy Week of worship that is upon us offers us the opportunity to walk through betrayal, suffering and death as a necessary prelude to the promised new life in God. It serves to remind us that we are not going to be rescued and we are not in control. And so as we face the cross of the Risen Christ, may we drop all pre-tense and see ourselves for who we really are... mistaken, forgiven, loved. May we enter the darkness of grief with faith that light will come again and may the loss of hope at the death of God clear the way for new life, for resurrection, to come.