

Good Friday – 25 March, 2016 – Dr. Jane Barter

Just a little different John 18.1–19.42

We have heard this story so many times, And indeed, we have heard it in *different* times of our lives. And I suspect, that if you are like me, much depends on the year and the life that you led that year in terms of what we hear and interpret in this story. Of which parts we select from the story to dwell upon, and which parts fade into the background.

But this year, as I reflected again on the story, I was struck by something that first claimed my attention many years ago I first took up Christian faith, and the question that arose is something that a newcomer to the story might ask:

*In what way is this death the same as every other death?
In what way is it different? (Repeat).*

If we have lived long enough and if have been attentive to recent history, we have heard the stories and have seen first-hand the deaths far too many. The past century told similarly horrifying tales of people hated, scorned and abandoned in much the same ways as Jesus was. In the past century, we witnessed desperate people dependent utterly and terrifyingly upon a system that was a mockery of all imaginable codes of justice.

We remember the blameless individuals tortured by brute force—persons who were innocent and yet found to be guilty because of the malice and corruption of the persons and systems that were trying them.

And more recently still, we have heard the stories recently of far too many captives who, like Jesus, stood before their torturers, bound, desperate, and alone. Persons like Kayla Mueller, Peter Kassig and Kenji Goto (all terrorized and killed by Isis) or closer to home, we have heard the stories of victims to similarly brutal violence and abandonment, such as Cindy Gladue and Tina Fontaine.

We have heard and we continue to hear far too many stories like these.

And we have seen death close up too, too often. We have witnessed the fear; have tended to the parched lips and incessant thirst, have heard the last words and last laboured breaths. And we have wept like the Marys who loved Jesus, and prepared our loved ones for burial like Joseph and Nicodemus. And some day others will do the same for us.

In so many respects, this death is much like ours.

But in some respects, this death is also *different* from ours. Not entirely and universally, perhaps, but importantly so.

Jesus meets his judges and his assailants not as one who is doomed and captive, but one who remains, even in the worst of conditions, *free*.

And even as he is tried by Pilate, the most powerful person in Judea, it is almost as though the tables are turned. As though Pilate the prisoner and Jesus the judge.

And even as Jesus hangs upon the cross, he is able to see his mother, and he sees his beloved disciple in their grief and their need, and he gives them to one another as mother and son. He creates—even in his dying—new bonds of family, new bonds of community.

Even in his dying, he gives, he forgives, and then he gives up his spirit.

Many of us have seen great courage in the face of death, and many of us have seen the dying become more truly and fully themselves. And perhaps the *something more* that Jesus displays is not a superhuman quality at all, but is instead *what it is to be most human*. That is, he shows even in his brief and final words and actions, and in the midst of great pain and difficulty, a life in which worldly power is put to death.

It is through his death shown to be what it truly is: impotent, banal, nothing. And he shows, in his final gesture to his mother and his beloved disciple, that love is truly stronger than death. That death need not mean solitude and separation only, but that it can become the foundation for a new community in remembrance of him.

It is difficult for us to know at this time what to make of these small differences—The difference between Jesus' death and the deaths that we see around us every day, day after day. But it seems to me that this difference reveals a secret passage to a life that moves from death to new life,

from despair to hope,
from Pilate's power to that of Christ.

It is the secret difference between death in this world, and death in the world where Jesus reigns. "When the Messiah comes," wrote the Jewish philosopher, Walter Benjamin, "Everything will be as it is now, *just a little different.*"

Let us hold on to the small difference that Jesus makes, as we meet together in the days ahead, and let us encourage one another, and all the more as we see the dawn approaching. Amen.