

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

18th March 2018

John 19:1-16a

Spirit... find us and inspire us... renew us and call us again... lead us and guide into your way... and in the end... may we be given fresh eyes to see your kingdom... in new ways... in our community and parish...

Shetland... TV detective series... a whodunnit based on characters from Anne Cleeves... about how dangerous a place Shetland has become... given the number of murders... Indeed so much so... if you visit... you'll automatically become a suspect... as there are so few residents left...

Or there is Modus... a Scandinavian psychological whodunnit... In this story no one saw the US president being abducted from her residence on an official visit to Sweden... We already know who the guilty player is... or so we think... but it looks like everyone is hiding something...

These are just a couple of a plethora of such programmes... I watch them... but can't keep up... I forget names... have we seen that person before... what relationship are they to the others... or do I recognise them from another programme entirely?... It's hopeless... so I tend to work out the culprit from least likely candidate... and just wait for the inevitable last minute twist or revelation of new evidence... and there you are... it was them after all... and it usually works...

But in all these stories... there are certain types... protagonists... bystanders... bits of information that should be revealed... but kept secret... innocent people shifted into the guilty position... and... with the clock ticking... a last minute tense breakthrough...

It is not that different from the story we just read today... of the trial of Jesus... Pilate... a baying crowd... bystanders who don't know better... and protagonists whose own interests are threatened...

Except this isn't a fictional TV whodunnit... It plays out all the same themes... but this is for real...

Though we don't always see it that way... we treat it as fiction... already knowing the conclusion... that God has it all planned... and we watch it... as Pilate and the crowd debate... as if they are of some consequence...

It is a way many cope with the story of Jesus condemnation... God has planned for Jesus to be tried... tortured... mocked... abused... and then crucified... God's been guiding it all the way... moving the key players into the right place at the right time... The Bible even says... God had the devil enter them... so they play into the hands of salvation...

For the plan is for Jesus to die in order... to take away our sin... a ransom for the many... whose blood washes clean our sin...

Now that may sound right... simply because we are familiar with the language of our hymns... but does anyone understand that... that Jesus died for our sin?... what does it mean... Jesus was a ransom... an atonement for us all?...

That somehow God let Jesus take the sin that is ours... and God's anger that would have been due to us... was instead let loose on Jesus... and thus God... who doesn't like sin... was appeased... Jesus was the ransom... and make us fit for heaven...

The concept... is surely primitive... abusive even... making your own son the sacrificial lamb for your own anger... is primitive... abusive even... a God who needs to be appeased...

But that's not the only way to understand the story...

If all these players were just pawns in the game... controlled by God... and salvation was the outcome of manipulation... then we have a very small view of salvation... and a love that is even smaller...

What if God didn't know how things would turn out... when Jesus set foot in Jerusalem... and chose to trust love... to love?...

And what if love didn't have to be manipulated... but was much, much bigger... than a pawn in a game of chess...

Let's retell it a little more realistically... Pilate sees Jesus is innocent... the baying crowd want him killed... and Pilate shuttles from inside with Jesus... to the crowd outside... and back again... He doesn't know what to do...

He appeals to the crowd... He appeals... pleaded almost with Jesus... "Don't you know I have to power to release you... or crucify you?"... It doesn't feel like a well worked out plan...

In the last 12 hours... Jesus has had something like six trials... each group debating what to do with him... working out a strategy where they come off best... then last minute decisions about who is best to work out the next bit... They don't have a plan... they just have an opportunity... and it's messy...

The whole thing is messy... In fact it is touch and go at times... No one knows how this will work out... it could go either way...

And Jesus is put up against a thief... Barabbas... and like some ancient version of X Factor... Pilate takes a public vote...

When you read it all in one go... and we all should towards Holy Week... or come to the Passion Play on Tuesday... but either way... it is messy... no one is in control... and it really is uncertain how this will turn out...

The innocent man... isn't going to get a reprieve... there is no clever twist... that stops the trial... or changes minds... no new evidence is presented that takes the whole thing in another direction...

God really has put Jesus into the hands of humanity... as was the intent back at incarnation... Jesus fate is in the choices of the crowd... the judge... the bystanders... and the self-interested... And it is horribly messy...

And what we watch unfold isn't inevitable... Jesus gets himself killed... because the crowd want him to die...

But then comes the twist... the unexpected witness that hasn't said anything up to now...

We've always thought it is all about the cross... but this witness reveals something more...

In this messy... confusing play... the whole of salvation is discovered through a different direction... because here Jesus chooses... to show all these different players... what love is like...

Jesus says... you can do all this to me... torture and crucify me... you can do anything you want... but love is my witness... and there is nothing you that will stop me loving you...

In all this mess... I could draw a line in the sand and say... You can only do so much... beyond that... I will not go... But Jesus doesn't... Jesus says... You carry on... You do what you like to me... I'll still love you...

And there is the revelation... in all the mess of the world... in all the power plays... in all the choices people make... there is no God controlling it... If God is... then this is not love... but through all the choices people freely make... love declares itself... and says I will die because of your choices... but even that won't stop me loving you...

And there is our salvation... No magic trick... no miracle... no ransom... no angry God... This is love... revealed...

In this version... the twist at the end... is that nothing we can do... can stop love loving us... and there is our salvation...

And our tremendous hope... because unplanned... and without any divine intervention or puppetry... in all the mess... love does what love does... and rises to the surface... It doesn't need help or manipulation or planning to do so...

And do we see that as a much bigger... and more real a thing to believe in... Love never lets us go... There is no line it will not cross... In all the mess and stoor of everything...

where everyone is guilty... it is the victim... that shows us what love is like... that even killing God's son cannot stop God loving us...

And that is an incredible thing... our salvation is found... in nothing other than the act of love...