

Heartstart—the Shock of Grace

A sermon preached by the Rev. Martin L. Smith at the Liturgy of Good Friday, April 2, 2010,
at St Columba's Episcopal Church, Washington, DC.

EACH NIGHT, however tightly we have held ourselves in control during the day, we have to let go to sleep, and as we allow ourselves to dream we discover again that our hearts have a life of their own, and they can sometimes speak to us in strange symbolic ways, trying to grab our attention when we are perversely turning away from our own deepest needs. I remember once when I was doing what members of 12 step programs called, “white-knuckling”— trying to manage intolerable feelings of depression and anxiety by sheer willpower—and I found myself waking each morning repeating over and over again with great urgency an incomprehensible sentence in Flemish. What was my heart trying to tell me through this foreign gobbledygook? After many weeks, I suddenly realized what the words meant. They were written on a metal label over the alarm button in the elevator in our Brussels apartment. I realized the words meant “In case of breakdown, call for help.” My heart was telling me to stop trying to manage on my own, and get someone to help me.

The heart sometimes speaks in the same way on behalf of God, and our dreams can sometimes alert us to the symbols that we must heed in order to meet God at the rendezvous of his choice. And in the last few months I have been waking up repeating two strange words alternately, O Heartstart! O Graceshock! as if they were a poem trying to come to birth. Heartstart? Heartstart? What is that? Then one day when I was passing through the Common, there was the word emblazoned over the symbol of a human heart with bolt of lightning flashing through it. It is the brand-name of the defibrillator that we installed a few months ago, thanks to a foundation that is giving them away for free. Somehow the Spirit has decided that this symbol is the meeting place for me this year where I come to the Cross, and the meaning of the Cross.

The Cross is the intervention of God to jolt the human heart back into life, to jumpstart and restart a heartbeat that has become weak and unreliable. It is the loving shock treatment of God to re-start the stopped heart, to shock it back into its beat of vulnerability, compassion, tenderness and imagination. The Cross is the Graceshock, the shock inflicted by Grace, that jolts us into resurrection.

Our installation of the defibrillator means something like this could happen at any time. A member of the congregation could slump to the ground unconscious. Trained responders would determine that the heart had stopped, and they would move swiftly to the glass-fronted tabernacle where the Heartstart is waiting. They will swiftly pull the machine from its scarlet casing, and apply the pads that will

administer the electric shock. Wham! Wham! And we hope the one slipping into lifelessness will suddenly have a heart-beat again, to our joy, to our relief. We will all be shaken at the intervention, that seems almost brutal, and yet our only hope is in the shock.

Today as we come to the foot of the cross, many of us have to admit that we have a quite different God in mind, and if we had had our druthers, our Savior would have been quite different. A Savior of choice would have been more a sage, like Socrates, teaching us how to reason and think finely, and willing to die with integrity or serenity. A savior of choice would have been more like the Buddha, a sage of radiant wisdom, an example of nobility of soul, dying with exquisite calm. A religion of our own devising would be one in which the Deity would handle us with kid gloves. But Christianity does not provide a Savior of our choosing, and we come to the cross to be scandalized again by a quite different revelation that at first sight seems more like an attack than a healing. Our religion is the outcome of shock-treatment by a shocking God, and our worship is not an arena for beautiful thoughts and serene contemplations, but a force-field where trailing wires are alive with a high-voltage charge, which if we touch we risk getting a shock that will jolt our whole being. Our worship is electric with grace. So today we come to touch these live wires, and to present our own breasts to receive the Heartstarting jolt of the gospel again.

St Mark tells us that at the moment of Jesus' death, the veil of the temple was torn from the top to the bottom. Jesus' death is a vandalistic attack by God on human religiosity. The temple veil was one the greatest art-works of the ancient world, an immense embroidered curtain two stories high that was emblazoned with exquisite needlework in blue representing the cosmos. It hung to bar access to the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctum that only the High Priest could enter. It was gorgeous, it was appropriate, because we human beings like to be protected from direct access to God's Holiness, we need the veil to insulate us from the shock. We would rather look at what we have made. The gospel tells us that the Cross is God's way of ripping down this insulation. Human religion is lovely, but it serves as much to keep God at arm's length as to connect us to the divine mystery. In the Cross of Christ, God rips the veil down the middle, because here is naked contact with the wounded heart of God, and our only hope is not to insulate ourselves from it, but to expose ourselves to direct contact with it, heart to heart with the suffering love of an incarnate God. That is what happened on the cross.

St John tells us that Jesus' last words were, "It is finished." Those words have layers and layers of meaning, but one of them especially touches the nerve. These are words that announce the end of human efforts to placate God, to bring God some offering or sacrifice that we imagine will have the effect of melting God's heart towards us, influencing God to bless us. From time immemorial human beings have brought stuff to God to make things work out, killing our choice livestock, burning our most costly fragrances, sacrificing, offering, giving. And the heart is used to the business of sacrifice, we all do it however 'modern' we are. We mustn't appear before God empty-handed, we tell ourselves. So we bring to church our sense of having made a bit of an effort to be good, we bring our respectability, we bring our right-mindedness, we bring our efforts at being generous, good stewards, we must have something in our hands, we even bring a bit of self-criticism just to show that we have penitence covered too.

St Matthew tells us that the crucifixion was a time of earthquake, and in the force field of the gospel where the ground heaves under our feet as we approach the cross, we can't hold on with stuff in our hands. The force of the cross knocks it all out our hands, we lose all footing in our own sense of having something to bring. And so the language of Christian worship is about empty-handedness. The Grace shock is to have God jolt us into empty-handedness so that we can be ready to be filled with a worth and a goodness that is not of our own making, but is a sheer gift from God who folds us in the embrace with which he enfolds his Son, his beloved. Empty-handed, we can take the hands of God who wants to dance with us, and can't if we insist on juggling with an armful of self-justifications. In the Heartstart of the cross-encounter we must let go of everything that impedes the sheer giving of God.

"Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the Cross I cling." It is amazing how the Cross inspires the poetry of touch. I cling, I touch. Direct contact. In the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, there is an altar set directly over what remains of Golgotha, the rocky hill outside the city wall which was the killing field for Jesus and the two Jewish insurgents that were crucified with him. There is a hole set in the floor of the chapel and it has been the practice for centuries for believers to kneel and thrust their arms down the hole to touch the rock. I remember praying there and seeing a little old lady come in and set her shopping bags down bulging with cabbages at the back of the chapel and then shuffling on her knees to put her hand down the hole to touch the rock. It seemed to say it all. Put all our stuff down. Get on our knees. Touch. Welcome the heartstarting graceshock that transmits directly the energy of divine

tenderness and re-creativity.

It is all about allowing ourselves to touch. In the liturgy of Good Friday we have been faithful here at St Columba's to a part of the ceremony that brings forward a wooden cross for us to reverence. But until now it has seemed, perhaps too "over the top" to include provision for worshippers to actually leave the comfort of the pew and come up to that cross to express devotion by kneeling and even touching the cross. That is the full ceremony that goes back to the early church in Jerusalem. Perhaps it seemed too embarrassingly demonstrative for people of our own culture. But this year we are going for the full version of the ceremony, taking the risk of inviting whoever feels so moved to come forward to reverence and touch the cross. Our lives are full of prohibitions, aren't they? From infancy people are always telling us, "You can look, but don't touch!" Here at the foot of the Heartstarting cross, the church gives us permission to overcome our inhibitions. You can look at the Cross of Jesus suffering love, and you can also touch. Feel free to touch and to be touched, and don't be afraid of the shock of grace that you might get from touching what is live!

In our religion of our own making, the Crucifixion would be something that with every passing year slipped further and further into the past, a bygone event that we would be almost relieved to think as a thing of the past. We could move beyond it, and speak of teachings, or principles, of a kind of spiritual essence distilled from those past events, a perennial spirituality. But the gospel of God in Jesus Christ is not a religion of human making, but of divine intervention and embodiment, and in the Church the Crucifixion of Jesus is not a thing of the past, but is really present here and now. In the liturgy, to quote Gertrude Stein, "there is no there there." There is here, Golgotha is Tenleytown. There is no then, there is now, and every Good Friday is the Good Friday. The intervention of God's own self embodied in the suffering Servant of Humanity, Jesus, is not there and then, it is always here and now, and our worship is in the Presence, immediately. Presented afresh to the ears through reading and singing, to the taste in the bread and wine, which is Christ's broken Body and his shed blood, to the sight in the rites that embody the Passion and make it visible. And it is present through the sense of touch, by which we enact our willingness for God to be alive to us through Jesus without any barrier or distance, Heart to heart. As John writes in his first letter, "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us."

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