

This is Good Friday. It is one of the most significant events in the Christian year. I have always wondered why Good Friday services are so sparsely attended in our Protestant tradition. Could it be that the annual reminder of Jesus' death on a cross is just too uncomfortable? Could it be that this statutory holiday coincides with the onset of spring and prairie people just want to go outside? Could it be that centuries of Christian theology have presented an understanding of the crucifixion that no longer resonates with liberal, progressive Christians?

The earliest interpreters of the Good Friday event were Jewish followers who were more than familiar with the idea of sacrificing to appease a disappointed God. Hebrew Bible stories about sacrificing doves, or bulls or sheep are common. Do a google search of sacrifice in the ancient world and you will learn that the Jews were not much different than their neighbours in believing that sacrifice, even blood sacrifice, was desired by the gods. Fortunately, those ancient Hebrews clung to the story of Jacob and Isaac, in which their God drew a line renouncing human sacrifice.

Sacrifice is the backdrop to traditional interpretations of Good Friday. Even though the ancient Hebrews had long since abandoned human sacrifice there was a lingering belief that God still desired a more substantial atonement for the sins of the world. And so those new Christians – formerly Jews – who wrote the stories of Jesus interpreted his death on the cross as the ultimate payment for human sinfulness. Fortunately, some modern theologians have called into question the idea that a loving God would require such a heinous act.

So why celebrate Good Friday at all? Why bring to mind Jesus' death on a cross? I have come to believe that Jesus' death was the consequence of his unwavering commitment to God's love rather than an act of obedience to demanding God. Jesus was willing to sacrifice his own safety and security to stand with the marginalized – those who were socially and economically ostracized because of race, gender, age, illness, marital status or occupation. Jesus was willing to sacrifice his own safety and security to stand against rigid religious structures that excluded and condemned rather than offering hope and possibility. Jesus' unwillingness to walk back from demands for justice, or to renege on acts of compassion, threatened those in power – the Roman occupation forces and the Jewish religious establishment. It was Jesus' refusal to abandon love that resulted in his execution. The protest march of Palm Sunday and the ominous actions of Maundy Thursday were signs that danger awaited. There would have been those who counselled retreat or suggested a pilgrimage into the desert, far from the present dangers. Jesus committed his life to living love into the world and so, despite the risk, he persisted.

Speaking truth to power always risks the possibility of sacrifice. The following article was printed in the Malaysian English-language newspaper, *Star*:

Dr Li, an ophthalmologist at a hospital in Wuhan, China, warned his former medical classmates on Dec 30, 2019, of his suspicion that seven patients

associated with a live-animal market, had been admitted to his hospital with a SARS-like infection. (subsequently) Dr Li was accused by Wuhan's Public Security Bureau on Jan 3 of "making false comments" that had "severely disturbed the social order". He was one of eight people investigated for "spreading rumours". The warning issued to Dr Li stated: "If you keep being stubborn, fail to repent and continue illegal activities, you will be brought to justice." He was forced to sign an order promising not to do it again, then he returned to work.

As an ophthalmologist Dr Li contracted the coronavirus from a female patient with glaucoma who had no visible symptoms. He died of his infection.

Those who speak truth in the midst of power are still vulnerable to false accusations and kangaroo courts. It should be no surprise that God seeks to empower both love and justice as one cannot truly exist without the other.

The prototypical image of one who is willing to risk life for love and justice is being reenacted the world over in these days of Covid-crisis. The God-power is incarnated in seemingly ordinary people who sacrifice their own lives. The *Guardian* newspaper reports of the sacrifice of a French physician:

Jean-Jacques worked on an emergency ward in Compiègne where France's first coronavirus cluster was recorded. His family announced his death in a social media (writing) "My father was a hero ... despite being of retirement age he kept working to support his colleagues. He sacrificed himself. He wanted to help."

Vietnam's Global.net reported:

"As the virus spread rapidly ... it worried medical officials, even experienced ones," Ms. Hung a ward nurse reported. "Yet," she said "The frontline medical staff were not reluctant to work overtime during the (New Year) holiday ... despite great psychological pressure and a high risk of infection. I am so proud," she said of the recovery of an older Chinese patient, "In spite of their sacrifices the hospital staff were very happy in his success."

The American industry magazine *Business Insider* provided the following:

"There's a certain amount of pride that comes with the job but definitely anxiety would be the overwhelming feeling," stated Rebecca a 45-year-old grocery worker "I'm scared to go to work and worried about getting sick over a job that pays less than \$12 per hour. But I also feel like I can't just stay home because the elderly need supplies and a kind word. It's a hard decision."

The message of Good Friday morning is one of sacrifice for the love of humanity. The archetypal actions of Jesus are being lived out in large and small ways around the world by ordinary people who are infused with love for others and are willing to sacrifice

their own safety, even on to death. I am reminded of the scriptural words: "No one has ever seen God. But if we love one another, God lives in us and God's love is made perfect in us." In these dark hours, while we wait for the power of resurrection, the love of God insists on being incarnated in the human heart. Thanks be to God who inspires such love in the human community! Amen.