

OUR GOD REIGNS?

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The story of the Ascension has two aspects to it – It says something about Jesus and it says something about our world. Let me start with the easy one. Firstly it's about Jesus. Question- Jesus' life is over, where is he now? Answer he is in heaven at the right hand of God. The resurrection is God's yes to Jesus and to everything he stood for. As Edmund Banyard puts it, he is caught up into all the glory of God.

But then secondly there is a statement about our lives. What kind of world is this? It's a world where Christ rules and reigns. "Therefore God highly exalted him, and gave him a name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth". Says John Robinson it proclaims "the manifest triumph of his way of love over every other force in the world". If you want to sum it up in 3 words there was a popular hymn a few years ago that had the chorus "Our God reigns."

To which I think the obvious response is, really? "The manifest triumph of his way of love". Does it look like it to you? St. George's, the Anglican Church in Baghdad, is packed to the doors every Sunday, and people take great risks to get there. As well as some very long services, the church provides food, medicine and dental care, and various other forms of support. Many in the congregation are widows or orphans. Fifty seven members were killed last year, more the year before, including all the church's lay-leaders. Just half a dozen men are left. "the manifest triumph of his way of love?"

Or Zimbabwe. Why am I so concerned about Zimbabwe? Well firstly because the gospel is world-wide. *No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; .any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind.*

But secondly this is an international church and we have members who come from Zimbabwe so this personal to us. This week one of those rang me. She had been hoping to make a journey home to see her family. But her mother had rung and told her it was not safe to come. People were being set on fire. People were being taken off in trucks by Zanu-PF and beaten up and then when they came back finding their homes destroyed. That's how they prepare for elections in Zimbabwe. This week Human Rights Watch reported "This violence is not only horrific, but it's very well-organized and targeted." People beaten with iron and wooden clubs, burned and stabbed. Our God reigns? Really?

To which my answer is yes God does reign. This is his world. But he reigns as he always did from a cross. Today we play down the cross. We like religion light and bright and crosses don't quite fit that. It's almost as if we're embarrassed by the cross. But the cross is at the heart of the way God works and without it you'll never make sense of the Gospel.

Go to Calvary and what do you see? It's not a world away from Zanu-Pf gangs torturing and killing. It's a man, battered, bruised, suffering, dying. At first he stands silent and helpless before his accusers. Then he is taken to a place called the skull and nails are driven through his hands and his feet and he is hung on the gallows. They mock him. "He saved others but he cannot save himself". Deserted by his followers alone with his agony he dies.

Calvary makes certain realities unmistakably clear. This is not a world where God's will is always done. Evil is real. Often the innocent suffer. Shut your eyes if you don't want to see it but Calvary is where illusions end. "No lord this will never happen to you" his followers had said. But it did and it can to any of us. As they take down the blood stained corpse it seems that everything has come to nothing. Pilate and Caiaphas are certain it is over. Jesus of Nazareth – who was he?

But look how it turned out. 3 days later in an Easter garden the story began again. Today had it not been for their part in Christ's life no-one would remember either Caiaphas or Pilate. The most significant figure in human history has turned out to be a Galilean carpenter who never wrote a book, owned little more than the clothes he stood up in, taught a few followers mostly in small lakeside towns, and was put to that terrible death. That bloody scene at Calvary turns out to be the moment when love's greatest victory was won and today we still sing

When I survey the wondrous cross on which the prince of glory died
My richest gain I count but loss
And pour contempt on all my pride.

The more you look at it at the more amazing it is. They nailed him to the tree, not knowing that by that very act they were bringing the world to his feet. They gave him a cross, not guessing he would make it a throne. They flung him outside the gates to die, not knowing that they lifting all the gates of the universe to let the king of glory in. They thought to root out his doctrines not understanding they were implanting in human hearts the very name they intended to destroy. At Calvary love turns out to be stronger than the very worst the darkness can throw at it.

Love is a particular kind of power. It works not through force and coercion but by touching hearts. You can squash it and smash and think you're seen the end of it but somehow it comes back again. Sometimes love works only through suffering – through carrying crosses but it has a power which nothing else can match. Brian Keenan was held hostage in the Lebanon. Recently he took his children back there because "I want my children to know that evil does not endure". This is not a morally neutral world. There is "a power which makes for righteousness", a resurrecting power that can take even the worst, and bring glory out of it. In the end of the day this is God's world. No lie can live for ever. Hope can begin anew.

Let me tell you a true story. Elizabeth Elliot is an American Christian whose books I have read and enjoyed over the years. But it was only recently that I discovered the story of her life. In the winter of 1956 five American missionaries penetrated the jungles of Ecuador in the hope of preaching the gospel to a tribe of Auca Indians. This was a daring thing to do because the only thing known about the Auca was that they killed every outsider who tried to establish contacts with them. When no word came back from the missionaries after several weeks the government sent in a search-party by helicopter, and from the air they saw the spear-riddled bodies of the missionaries floating in a river near the shore. So the enterprise had failed and that should have been the end of the story.

It was not the end, however, but only the beginning. Elizabeth Elliot's husband was one of those who died. She was left with a 3 year old daughter Valerie. Friends expected them to return to the United States but she determined to stay and attempt to carry through her husbands work. It seemed an insane ambition. Neither she nor anyone else knew the Auca

language and there was no reason to suppose that she would not meet exactly the same fate as her husband had.

Then one day unexpectedly two Auca girls ventured to the edge of the jungle where they became fascinated by the signs of civilization. By winning their friendship Elizabeth Elliot persuaded them to live for a time at the mission station and by patient trial and error she managed to establish simple communications with them. Confident that she could now converse with their people she proceeded to make preparations for her trip to the interior. Carrying her 3 year old child, her camera and a few possessions, she set off behind the two Auca girls, back through the perilous jungle until she came face to face with the naked tribesmen who had killed her husband.

At first they were hostile but through the intercessions of the two Auca girls they did not kill her and her child but let her live among them. For a whole year she stayed with them. She identified herself totally with their life, living in one of their huts, eating their food, sharing their joys and sorrows. She made no effort to evangelise them but simply communicated the Gospel through her life. In time she told them that her husband was among those who they had killed and that she grieved over his death, but that she fully forgave them for the wrong they had done. This brought them face to face with a love quite unlike anything they had known and the bonds of understanding began to grow. She saw they were not just the savages that people imagined. They came to realise that they had made a mistake in killing the missionaries and they admitted they were sorry. Some became Christians. It is said now that the area is totally changed because of Elizabeth Elliot and what she did. One woman's vulnerability and willingness to love touched people in a way that nothing else could have done.

The gospel is that love is the ultimate power of life. It appears to be weak. It may be crucified. But in the end it will have the final word. As Philip Larkin wrote "what will survive of us is love". When all that violence and power can do has turned to ashes the victories of love will remain. The cross leads on to the Easter garden and "the manifest triumph of his way of love".

This morning amid a world of violence and turmoil let us proclaim that truth. This morning let the good news that Jesus rules and reigns take away our fears and send us back to a troubled world with a new perspective, a new confidence in a God who cares, and a new desire to reflect this love of Christ to others. This morning is a good day to say "Our God reigns".

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