**A Brief Reflection for Good Friday.**

Most Good Fridays I do not get the opportunity to preach as we generally are engaged in an ecumenical walk of witness, even when I do preach on this day it has never been practice to preach at length. In part this is based in an acknowledgement that so often people have family and friends to visit and things to do, and how we miss that right now. Apart from issues of practicality I think this is one of those days when not many words need to be said, when the very solemnity of the day speaks for itself.

Also for a preacher, Good Friday is a minefield, in many churches today will hear how Jesus died for our sins. How his death was somehow necessary as a penalty to satisfy the justice of God. What does this mean? Here’s a true story of the cost of grievance and how it ruins lives.

One hot summer’s night in the year 2000 an Albanian man, frankly drunk on the local brandy took great offence at a comment made that his family some 100 years earlier had backed down in a quarrel. Injured pride is a dangerous thing in Albanian culture, it is fuel on the fire of vendetta. Since then his family, and the family of the man who insulted him has each lost a dozen or so people and there is no end in sight. These feuds can go on for generations, there are children who cannot play outside because they are perceived to be legitimate targets in feuds going back 50, 60, 70 years. Sometimes they can be brought to an end by mediation, honour is satisfied and face is saved; at a cost.

Do we imagine God to be like this? Wrathful, incapable of mercy, only able to let go of grievance after complex and costly mediation? What is sometimes forgotten is this idea – substitutionary atonement – Is quite late. It dated from medieval legal theory when philosophers who understood God to be perfectly just wondered how God could forgive sin, it was clear to them that God’s honour needed to be satisfied by the death of a blameless sinless victim, God’s own son. It may be neat and elegant legal theory but it seems quite monstrous to me and one I think few thinking people draw on without significant modification and nuance.

More and more churches, churches tell a different story, how Jesus lived and died in integrity and obedience. How his death was not necessary for our salvation, but was probably the inevitable outcome of the disconcerting good news Jesus proclaimed and should be seen in the contest of his life and preaching. In fact this isn’t new, it is an earlier understanding than the medieval one, it was effectively sidelined though for centuries

Which takes nothing away from the power and solemnity of this day. On this most sombre of days we are confronted by the vulnerability of one who in obedience and love faced death, however familiar the story we are challenged and shaken again by the utter rejection and abandonment that Jesus faced in his dying.

Generally speaking Methodist spirituality avoids a forensic dwelling on the physical suffering experienced by Jesus, not for us the gorier type of crucifix seen in some Catholic countries at this time of year, nor for that matter the lyrics of some of the more blood soaked hymns that some Protestants might sing today. No one here is getting washed in the blood of the lamb!

Yet confronted by the rawness and power of this day we pause, we reflect on one who in his living and dying showed us a fullness of life. If anyone were to ask what God is like then we can do no better than to point to the living and dying of this man. Likewise there is no better answer for us to the question; what should a human life be like?

Today then we are confronted by that most basic question; “How then shall we live?” How should we live in a way which honours the one who lived and died and was brought into a life beyond all dying?

We are invited this day to embrace the spirit of goodness and godliness, to let passion or suffering nurture compassion in us. When we do this what seems the most tragic of stories, the greatest travesty of justice, the most troubling case of innocent suffering is redeemed and it births our redemption.

May the solemnity of this day speak to our hearts and challenge us to live in compassion and mercy. May it be so among us. Amen.