

2 April 2010
Good Friday

Sermon notes on John 19.1-16
Rev Dr Craig Thompson

Auburn UCA

Available from www.auburnuc.org.au

I suspect that not too many of you present today will be familiar with the TV series "Dexter". "Dexter" is the name of the main character in the series, a 30-something fellow, whose day-job is as a "blood-spatter" analyst with the local police department. That is, he specialises in interpreting the patterns of splashed blood at crime scenes to determine what happened – where the victim stood or how she moved during the attack, what kind of weapon was used and how, and so on.

But, as interesting as his day-job is, rather more interesting is his night-job, which is...serial killer! That being said, it is important to know that Dexter is a *good* serial killer, in that he only kills bad people! The restrictions he places on his killing actually make him a strangely attractive character. As gory and horrific as his night-job is, what appeals about it is that his victims are carefully chosen to be only those who themselves are unrepentant and free-roaming killers. Dexter refers to this work as "taking out the trash". He is very meticulous in establishing that his victims *deserve* to die and he resists using his "powers" for his own advancement. There is then, if rather paradoxically, a very strong moral bent to his killing.

But the psychology of the show goes one step further, and it is this next step which makes Dexter a useful foil for reflecting on the events of Good Friday. Until the end of the first season of the series in fact only his victims know that Dexter is killing, so effective is his disposal of their bodies. But the first season ends with him killing another psychopath – the so-called "Ice Truck Killer" who had been terrorising the city – and the story requires that in fact this man's body be left to be found. As the local blood-spatter expert, Dexter is then called to the scene of his own crime to comment on what might have happened. That irony aside, the truly interesting thing is his reflection on how the people gathered by the news of the Ice Truck killer's own death might respond if they knew it was Dexter himself who had disposed of the threat. He concludes:

"...deep down I'm pretty sure [everyone would] appreciate a lot of my work... Yeh, they see me – I'm one of *them*, in their darkest dreams..."

For all the extreme violence in his actions, Dexter is revealed as "everyman" – no so much "one of us" as we are one *with* him, in our "darkest dreams".

Now that is rather a strong statement, and most of us are likely to reject it out of hand. The reason we object here is that most of us, most of the time, are thorough-going moralists, to which I'll return in a moment. But first I want to shift us from our thoughts about the *morals* of killing to the theme of *sacrifice*. Sacrifice is a theme very close to the heart of some traditional understandings of the atonement, but it is also operating in Dexter's horrifying little world.

The point about Dexter's activities is not simply that he is killer, and therefore immoral; there is a *reason* that he kills the people he does. He determines that it is *good* that his victims are dealt with in this way, and the good is that the world is a better place – a safer place – without them. The spilling of *this* blood, the letting go of *this* life, is a price which is worth paying for what is received in return. This exchange is central to the logic of sacrifice.

If what Dexter does is not so much killing as making a sacrifice, it makes little sense to consider his actions "bad" or immoral, for they now, in fact, become kind of *necessary* because of the desirability of what is gained.

Now, at least traditionally, sacrifice like this has been made to a "god". There is no religious faith implicit in Dexter's actions – he is avowedly atheistic – but there is certainly a spirit which is appeased in the sacrifice: Dexter's horrific work is necessary to reduce the world's anxiety.

But the important point to keep in mind here is the sacrificial logic of *exchange*: in offering *this* up, we receive *that*; if I want *that*, it will cost me *this*. This is different from the typical *moral* logic which causes us to reject the suggestion that we are in Dexter, and he in us. We imagine that morals aren't *necessary*, but rather are something we make free decisions about, otherwise it makes no sense to accuse someone of being *immoral*. Morally, I *choose* not to do what Dexter does, even if sometimes I might want there to be a Dexter out there somewhere, "taking out the trash". So, if someone is immoral, it is because he has *chosen* to be, for he was *free* to be otherwise, and so his immorality was *unnecessary*.

But, in contrast, sacrifice is about *necessity* – a necessity to do with exchanges. I make a sacrifice *according to a predetermined arrangement*. It is *necessary* for this price to be paid in order to achieve what I desire. We trade this for that in an economy of exchange –

perhaps the life of a not-so-valued person for the well-being of a greater number. So it is with traditional sacrifices, whether the life of a lamb to appease the god of a tribe, or the offering of a pure young soul to the angry god of the volcano, or whatever: a small price to pay, we think.

This puts a different slant on Dexter's activity, and his status as "everyman" (and woman!). Most of us will not wear that we are Dexter if we imagine our actions all to be free and not forced or necessary and we know that *we* don't choose to do what he does. But if we consider Dexter's night-time activities not in terms of their morals but in terms of a logic of sacrifice, then we can begin to see something of ourselves in him.

Now this is not to suggest that what Dexter wants to do (and perhaps we with him) is *good*. It simply helps us to see past what he *does* to what is happening for him, and for us. There is much we do and allow not because we think it moral, but because, implicitly or explicitly, we think it *necessary*, however costly it may be for some.

And now, finally, we come to our gospel reading(!). Jesus stands before Pilate. On what basis will Pilate act? What is the *moral* thing to do, the "free choice" he should make? In the story Pilate seems to resist the claims of the temple authorities about what is necessary. That is, he begins with the assumption that he has a *freedom* to act, which freedom he tests in his verbal jousts with Jesus' accusers. It seems that Pilate can see no *need* to convict and execute Jesus, but at the beginning knows only that he *can* convict, or set free.

But as the debate unfolds the *need* for a conviction grows stronger and the freedom to choose diminishes. First there's the argument from "the Jews" (as they are caricatured): "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God" (18.7). This, however, is the need as perceived by Jesus' enemies, and not by Pilate himself. What *does* move Pilate is the suggestion that Jesus threatens Pilate himself, so that Jesus' death now becomes needful also for Pilate: "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor" (18.12). Whether Jesus lives or dies is now no longer a simple question of free morals, but one of necessity. What is gained, and what is lost, if Jesus dies? Very little is lost it would seem – apart from one more-or-less useless-looking peasant – but much is secured. Given what is at stake, it becomes necessary, then, that Jesus be sacrificed.

Jesus does not die, then, because of the free-but-bad morals of evil men; Jesus dies because that is obviously what *has* to happen; it is

necessary that Jesus dies. The high priest Caiaphas put it beautifully a little earlier in the story, in an address to his fellow priests: "...[understand that] it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed (John 11.50)." Jesus *must* be sacrificed, but the "must" is felt here not by God – as suggested by traditional atonement theory – but by the people. Jesus is the *people's* sacrifice, a sacrifice which has to be made to save "the whole nation" and keep imperial management of the province simple.

The truly interesting question is this: in what sense is Jesus' death necessary from God's point of view? In what sense is Jesus' death a sacrifice by God? Is Dexter in *God* as well?

A lot of our half-thought talk about the atonement does make God out to be a divine Dexter. We talk, as if from God's point of view, about Jesus "having" to die, as if there were some ancient and mystic economy of exchange which bound God's hands, such that even God is not free but bound by necessity: Jesus is the price God has to pay for our salvation.

But talk about Jesus as a divine sacrifice only makes Christian theological sense if it has to do with *breaking* the bonds of necessity on us, precisely because God is not bound but *free*. The final necessity to which we are all subject is death – our own death and the death of others. We do not *choose* to die, but are bound by it. It is *necessary* that we die. All the other lesser necessities we have to respond to are simply "little deaths" – lesser but still real restrictions on the ultimate freedom we so greatly desire.

But on Good Friday, the God who is free of the final and all-determining necessity of death in fact *chooses* death for himself. We sacrifice because it is necessary; God sacrifices (himself) because he chooses to. The God who is free subjects himself *in order to demonstrate that he is free* from the necessities which limit us. God is not immune to death, but free from its strong hold. This is not clear, of course, until Easter, and without Easter we can see in Jesus on the cross only another victim of circumstance and necessity. But Easter does shine its light upon this Good Friday, revealing not only that God is free, but that God's freedom is a freedom for *us*.

As good as we are at dealing death on account of pressing necessities which compel us – as "dextrous" as we are at death, great and small – and as resigned as we are to the fact that such death-dealing is a necessary part of our life, in the story of Good-Friday-and-Easter a new possibility is put to us. That possibility is that death is not the all-determining necessity we imagine it to be. Jesus upon the cross, God-in-Jesus freely choosing the cross, is the denial of

death's claim, a snubbing of the power of the fear of death to determine our actions. Jesus chooses to live, to be free, even if that means death on a cross. This is a kind of death-denying life we have not seen before, a kind of life sealed and revealed from the perspective of Easter day. Nothing is sacrificed here other than death's claim on Jesus.

This is a new thing. This is the gospel. By the grace of God it is enough for we who are dextrous-at-death to turn from deeds done in fear of the dark to a life which is indeed whole and free.

By the grace of God, may such a turning to life be by ours, today. Amen.