

GOOD FRIDAY MEDITATION

I am going to base my few words on the next hymn 602, Sing my tongue the Glorious Battle .

It was written thirteen hundred years ago by Fortunatus, Bishop of Gaul. The writer lived in Gaul in dangerous times. The work of the church was hard. It was a time when missionaries and Christian priests were simply swatted like flies when they approached some of the more blood-thirsty tribes.

This hymn sees the whole of the Passion of Christ in terms of a battle - a glorious battle. This is not surprising in view of the struggle that the seventh century bishop had in making Christ known in the barbarous south of Gaul. In calling it a battle, Fortunatus is remembering Paul's words in Ephesians. In a modern paraphrase it says this:

So take everything the Master has set out for you, well-made weapons of the best materials. And put them to use so you will be able to stand up to everything the Devil throws your way. This is no afternoon athletic contest that we'll walk away from and forget about in a couple of hours. This is for keeps, a life-or-death fight to the finish against the Devil and all his angels.

Paul sounds so different in modern English, doesn't he. But in what sense is Jesus' battle '**glorious**'? A small squad of men, a beaten prisoner who cannot resist, even if he would. Nearly naked he is forced to lie against rough baulks of stinking timber, which have been used for this despicable act many times before. Then his wrists and his feet were nailed with nails - big nails nearly a foot long for they had to carry his full weight. Then the whole cross is hauled upright with ropes and thuds down with a wrenching jar into its socket.

Where is the glory in that?

True, some writers have seen the cross as a perverse throne - we have hymns which say just that - 'throned upon the awful tree', or "From the Throne of His cross the King of grief cries out to a world of unbelief". But the point of these hymns is the **paradox**, the very un - glorious nature of this **throne**.

So this battle against evil is won on the cross - but it is also a battle to be won every day by you and me. It is **our** battle - that is the good fight that you and I have to make every day of our lives. As Paul says, this is no afternoon athletic contest that we'll walk away from and forget about in a couple of hours. This is for keeps, a life-or-death fight to the finish against the Devil and all his angels.

But by the time Jesus had allowed himself to be taken in the Garden, was there any more struggling to be done? Is the cross really to be seen in terms of a battle? Jesus was totally outnumbered, he was bound. He was silent - he did not revile his accusers. He simply went along with the events that had started

with his arrest. So where is the battle?

Well yes, I am sure there is a battle, but it may not be the one on the hill called Calvary. | actually can see two separate Battles - the battle with death itself which is won by the resurrection. That is the Battle that God won for us. And of course that is glorious in its effects on the world. It is transforming and healing. But there is also the Battle that Jesus the man won as well.

For me, the first victory of the cross is a victory of Jesus against his thoroughly human fear. After the Last Supper, Jesus went out into the night to confront his fear, his human nature, and perhaps even his doubts.

Then he went off from them about the distance of a stone's throw and knelt down and prayed. ⁴²"Father," he said, "if you will, take this cup of suffering away from me. Not my will, however, but your will be done." ⁴³An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. ⁴⁴In great anguish he prayed even more fervently; his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. Jesus had started his ministry at the Jordan, when God spoke from heaven and called him "My son, the beloved. God affirmed Jesus to the world. Then God again confirmed Jesus in his ministry on the mountain of Transfiguration. That was only a few short weeks before Maundy Thursday.

You see: Jesus knew that it was no good teaching out in the country - on the outskirts. He simply had to go to Jerusalem - to be there for the Passover, that great symbol of salvation. And the crowd sang the hallel psalms which specifically refer to the Messiah as they led him into Jerusalem. They sang those same psalms, all the Jews, as part of the observance of the passover meal. That is what is referred to when the gospel says: And when they had sung the last one, Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.

And for me, it is here that the battle takes place. Jesus can see where it is all going to end up. Should he just go and vanish into the night? He could have done. It was surely his choice - even though he knew that God wanted him to see it through. Jesus was not a puppet - he was a man, and he had the very real terror of the cross. But Jesus conquers his fear, and stands up and say: "Come let us be going" as he goes to meet the gang that Judas has brought to arrest him.

So the Battle of the Passion is not won for me with the scourging, the nailing and the suffering as he hung on the cross. The fact that Jesus could screw up his courage to go, quietly as the Lamb of God to the slaughter, and die for you and me is the true victory.

But this hymn speaks to me of more than just the glorious battle.

In the second and third verses we see something of God's patience in setting

up salvation's plan. In a few short words we go from Creation and creator to the incarnation. In two or three short lines we have before us the cosmic nature of this encounter at Calvary. We see the patient working of Almighty God in unfolding the creation and the plan for redemption. Then there is Jesus' patience in his 30 years of life which culminate in this moment.

'Willingly he meets his passion - born to set his people free' says the hymn. He goes willingly because he has submitted his entire will to this course of events when he won in Gethsemane. Even though he is a man - he knows in faith that this course of action will provide the Father with the means to glorify the Son. And it has to be faith - He can only know in faith - Jesus has emptied himself of all divine knowledge. But his faith is strong enough to carry him through the ordeal - to which he goes, to be sacrificed.

But the human-ness of Jesus shows up on the cross. This is a real man. There is a moment of terrible doubt isn't there? The black of night in that Friday afternoon. The sudden feeling that God has turned away from his Son. Jesus falters on the cross - momentarily. Eloi, Eloi, lama sabacthani. My God - not O God, not my Father - but My God. Where are you when I need you. And then with faith regained he cries the cry of victory - It is Accomplished. It is Done. It is achieved - it is accomplished - and he gives back to His Father in faith the spirit that came from the Father.

And the hymn finishes with a verse of praise to the Blessed trinity - a thanksgiving for these great victories that took place on a small hill in a little insignificant country on the borders of the Roman World.

Yes indeed - sound the high triumphal lay - for Christ has indeed won the victory - for you and for me.

Thanks be to you, O lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits you have won for us; for all the pains and insults you have borne for us. Most merciful redeemer, friend and brother, may we know you more clearly, love you more dearly and follow you more nearly, day by day.

Now we'll sing the hymn.