Divine Dominoes

Passion Sunday sermon preached by Bishop Jo on 28th March 2021 for the diocese of Guildford

Liturgy of the Passion:
[Mark 14.1 – end of 15](http://almanac.oremus.org/bible.html?show_ref=no&version=nrsvae&passage=Mark%2014.1%20-%2015.47) (see [here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBk9LuQL5L0&t=1096s) for a locally-produced dramatic version from St Mary’s Shalford)

I wonder when you last played a game of dominoes. Nobody exactly agrees on the rules, of course, about things like whether you put the double six sideways at the beginning of the game or not, and how you judge who comes second – whether by adding up the number of remaining pieces or the number of the dots on the remaining pieces. But every single person in the whole wide world who has ever played a game of dominoes agrees on one single thing: there comes a point in every game when you lose interest in the regular rules and instead you make a long snake by lining every piece up on its end about an inch apart and then watching them topple over. And you will find that YouTube provides the proof: because there you will find thousands of people who have deemed their efforts of lining up and then toppling over myriad upon countless myriad of dominoes in ever more elaborate cascades worthy of viewing by the whole world.

I invite you to think about that cascade of dominoes for a moment: about its metaphorical power. I never exactly excelled at history in school but I do recall all sorts of topics that, with hindsight, were explicable by reference to dominoes. For example, the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian empire. On July 28, 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, was shot by a Serbian assassin in Sarajevo. Austria-Hungary prepared for war with Serbia. Russia prepared to defend Serbia against Austria-Hungary. Germany prepared to defend Austria-Hungary against Russia. France prepared to defend Russia against Germany. Germany prepared to attack France through Belgium. Britain prepared to defend Belgium against Germany. The Turks rallied behind Germany. Japan rallied behind Britain. Within a month, all were at war. The first domino fell; and the rest came tumbling down. Four years later, 15 million people were dead.

Another example might be Rwanda. Before the Belgians came, the minority Tutsi had ruled over the majority Hutu. The colonial Belgians exacerbated the tensions between the peoples, and by the time they left, the Tutsis held almost all the political and economic power, while the Hutus were mostly landless and poor. In 1962 the Hutus overthrew the Tutsi monarchy and instituted a Hutu republic. In 1990 Tutsis invaded from Uganda and started a civil war. In 1994 the Hutus assassinated their own president and initiated a genocide of Tutsis, killing 800,000 in 100 days. Years later the refugee Tutsis, now in north-eastern Congo, initiated a civil war in the Congo. Again, as one domino falls, it leads to another, and another. And alas there seems no end to it, even today.

Holy Week tells a story of falling dominoes. I urge you to read the whole account of the passion in one sitting –Mark chapters 14-15, or if you prefer one of the other gospels. One after another of the disciples, the crowd, the Pharisees, the Romans, the Sadducees, the scribes, the criminals, the bystanders, the pilgrims all fall down one after another. It’s a domino story. It’s a fall story. It’s a kind of multi-dimensional, violent re-enactment of the story of Adam and Eve. A mixture of temptation, short-sightedness, fear, panic, forgetfulness, stupidity, and rebellion leave practically every character sprawled on the ground like fallen dominoes.

Except for one. That’s what we see in Holy Week. We see God, in human form, insert two hands into that cascade of falling dominoes, and say, “Stop.” The dominoes have been falling so fast for so long and so violently that those two hands that intervene get overwhelmed, crushed, obliterated. They get nailed. Because they’re divine hands, they have the power to stop even a rampaging torrent of plummeting dominoes. But because they’re human hands, they hurt like hell. That’s what happens in the cross. The divinity of humankind says “Stop.” And the humanity of God gets crushed.

But “Stop” doesn’t turn out to be the last word. In the greatest miracle, a miracle that you won’t found on YouTube but the most wondrous thing that ever happened, God raised Jesus from the dead. And every one of those dominoes, whose combined weight had fallen on and crushed Jesus when he dared to say “Stop,” now slowly, meticulously, mesmerically, is raised back to its full height, to play and be enjoyed again. Every domino had been knocked over by the one behind it. Now every domino was being raised up again by the strength of that very same domino that had knocked it over. “Stop” was an amazing, costly, astonishing, crushing word of God. But “Stop” wasn’t the last word God said. The last word God said – picking up each individual domino and turning it from an agent of the fall to an agent of resurrection – the last word God said, was “Go.”

On November 8, 1997, Gordon Wilson, a 60-year-old draper from Enniskillen, Northern Ireland, and a lifelong Methodist, attended a Veterans Day ceremony at the war memorial in his home town with his daughter, Marie, a nurse. During the ceremony, a bomb planted by the Provisional IRA exploded. It was a massacre. This is how Gordon Wilson described his parting from his beloved daughter, Marie.

*She held my hand tightly, and gripped me as hard as she could. She said, 'Daddy, I love you very much.' Those were her exact words to me, and those were the last words I ever heard her say… But I bear no ill will. I bear no grudge. Dirty sort of talk is not going to bring her back to life. She was a great wee lassie. She loved her profession. She was a pet. She's dead. She's in heaven and we shall meet again. I will pray for these men tonight and every night*." [William Ury, The Third Side, 1999]

The Northern Irish Troubles had been one long domino chain. Loyalist distrusted British and gerrymandered politics and society to disadvantage Nationalist; nationalist rebelled and were threatened by Loyalist; British intervened to protect Nationalist but ended up being seen as the enemy by Nationalist, whereupon the killing of Loyalist by Nationalist and Nationalist by Loyalist became an almost everyday occurrence for 20 years. Until Gordon Wilson said stop. Until Gordon Wilson said, “I bear no ill will. I bear no grudge. … I will pray for these men tonight and every night.”

As one historian [Jonathan Bardon] recounts, “No words in more than 25 years of violence in Northern Ireland had such a powerful, emotional impact.” Enniskillen was the lowest moment in the whole history of the Troubles. But, because of one man’s witness, because of one man’s faith, because of one man’s willingness to let Christ work in him when he had no strength of his own, Enniskillen became the day when Northern Ireland began to say “Stop.” And Enniskillen became the day the peace process began to say, “Go.”

As we walk through Holy Week together, we see the fall. From this joyous Palm Sunday, this exuberant day of creation, a day of Hallelujah and Hosanna, we descend to the Fall: we see the falling of one domino after another, and watch each one bring the next one down and the next one and the next. And we see our own fall in the fall of each of these characters, who fall for the same reasons we do. But then we see one character say, “Stop.” And we see a ton of bricks fall on top of him. But because of that “Stop,” there can be a “Go.” Because of the cross, there can be the resurrection. Because Gordon Wilson said what no one else had found it in them to say, people could begin to imagine peace in Ireland. Because Jesus gave himself in a cause that no one else ever could, so the dominoes are reversed, and we too may pass from death to life.

May this be a holy week for you. May it be a rediscovery of how the whole world falls. May it be a week where we draw breath as we witness the decisive One whose ‘Stop’ reversed the Fall, and so where we discover where in our life, where in the domino-chain of this world, we can find the strength and the courage and the wisdom to say, “Stop.” And equally, when it comes to that pivotal divine ‘Go’, where we may become not only witnesses to the Resurrection – but agents of God’s new creation in the world.