The question many of us might want to ask on Good Friday is what’s so good about it? The Son of God is mocked, beaten and ultimately crucified between two bandits. If it is good it might be reasonable to say that Christian’s have a pretty weird view of what is good. If you are into etymology (and who isn’t) you might know that there is something of a debate about how this moniker came to be and if good really means good. One theory holds that the term was originally God’s Friday and somehow over the years it got changed to Good Friday. Another theory is that the term good is original but that its definition for good has changed and that at the time it was introduced good was more of a synonym for holy. So, saying Good Friday was more akin to saying Holy Friday. If we want to venture into other languages, we see that they have different takes on what to call this day. The Roman Catholic Church before 1955 used a Latin phrase which translated as “Friday of Preparation” and after 1955 they used a different Latin phrase which translated as “Friday of the Passion and Death of the Lord.” By 1970 this phrase was shortened to “Friday of the Passion of the Lord.” The Germans have a couple of names for today but they usually use a phrase which means roughly “Mourning Friday.” That is “m-o-u-r-n” and not “m-o-r-n.” The French and Spanish both use a phrase which means Holy Friday. There is one exception to this and that is the Dutch who use a term which translates as Good Friday. Which brings us full circle and raises the question of what if it isn’t a mistake? What if it really is meant to be good? How do we go about understanding it?

As I said on the surface it looks like anything but good, especially if you have seen Mel Gibson’s orgy of violence known as *The Passion of the Christ*. But it is not just the brutality of it all there is also the complete injustice in the crucifixion. The one who was without sin is condemned to die. You can call it brutal; you can call it criminal, or unjust or unfair or evil but whatever you call it there does not seem any good in it. But let me tell a story and see if it does something to make sense of the name.

The other day I read a story about the Russian dissident author Alexander Solzhenitsyn during his time in the gulag told by the writer Kevin Belmonte. He writes “[Solzhenitsyn] endured unspeakable cruelty and was pressed into backbreaking work day after day while being slowly starved to death. One day the hopelessness overcame him. Solzhenitsyn stopped working, dropped his shovel, lumbered over to a bench and sat down. He knew at any moment a guard would order him up, and, if he failed to respond, would likely bludgeon him to death with a shovel. He had seen it happen to others. As he sat there, waiting, head down, he suddenly felt a presence. He looked up and there was an old man with a wrinkled unexpressive face. The man was hunched over. But with his stick, he drew something in the sand at Solzhenitsyn’s feet. It was the sign of the cross. As Solzhenitsyn stared at that symbol, his entire perspective somehow changed. He knew he was one man pitted against the Soviet Empire, but he also knew that hope for all mankind was represented by the simple cross of one man who stood against the history of the ages and triumphed. Getting up, Solzhenitsyn reached for his shovel and returned to work, awaiting the day when his writings on truth and freedom would engulf the world.”

It is strange but there is something encouraging in seeing the cross. In it we see represented this world at its most evil. But we also see it and know that it is not an end. What I imagine Solzhenitsyn saw when he looked down at that cross drawn in the dirt was both an acknowledgement of his present circumstances and an acknowledgement of the power of God in the midst of strife. I am sure all of us have been in difficult circumstances and had someone come along and offer us some trite bit of encouragement like turn that frown upside down or when life gives you lemons make lemonade. But the cross isn’t trite. It doesn’t downplay the awfulness of our circumstances. However, it does not stop there because it also shows the power of God. So, there is good in today, not because of what happened but because of the love and power of God. Today’s goodness shows that we worship a God who knows what it is to suffer. A God who will be with us regardless of the circumstance. We worship a God who shows himself in the gulag and shows a way forward. The cross is the embodiment of things at there worst but it also the beginning of a journey towards our redemption so that we may be God’s own this day and forevermore.