

Palm Sunday, 2024
St. Peter's, Philadelphia

THE CRUCIFIED JESUS IS NO STRANGER

As a Roman Catholic child in the late 50's/early 60's, one learned to take Lent very personally. I remember one of the nuns who taught me suggesting that the commission of a personal sin—such as eating meat on Friday, or (God forbid) missing Mass—was akin to pounding another nail into the flesh of Jesus on the cross. The theological proposition of the “once and for all” suffering of Christ at Calvary notwithstanding, we were given the distinct idea that we could, indeed, contribute to the suffering of Jesus without hardly a second thought. Having always a bit susceptible to super-ego overload, I suppose I might have easily succumbed to the guilt which has often seemed like a necessary orientation for true Christianity. But rather than feeling overly scrupulous, I instead seemed to develop a tendency to question so many of the assumptions made in the church, including the notion that we should retain a sense of personal responsibility for the death of Jesus.

What I did take from my childhood was something of a deeply personal and emotional relationship to the events of Holy Week. The Friday afternoon Stations of the Cross, the veiled statues, the somber atmosphere of the church—all conveyed a sense of intimate sobriety—the kind one might observe at a wake or funeral liturgy. And I did have a sense that these events were genuinely tragic, even with thoughts of the Easter celebration on the horizon. Years later, through theological studies and beyond, I would continue to grapple with the deep meaning of the week we observe beginning each year on Palm Sunday. I could hardly ever not be moved by the image of the brutality of the cross and the ugliness of the horde which so quickly turned from shouts of “hosanna” to taunts of “Crucify him.” But how should we respond to this event of the death of Jesus? It's true, we are remembering the death of a man at one time and in one place, and yet the liturgy of this week invites us to a deep emotional engagement and sense of timelessness as we again are drawn to the streets of Jerusalem and the foot of the cross to mourn the humiliation and death of a man. If we are inclined to think about these sorts of things, we might wonder again what the death of Jesus really meant for the world. We might worry that we don't feel sad enough, or emotionally invested in this very familiar story, or feel a deep resistance to contemplating yet one more tragic scene. Wherever we are, we are.

There have been no shortage of attempts to explain the meaning of the Passion of Christ, starting as early as St. Paul. And, as with all of the great mysteries of faith, there are overlapping and, at times, contradictory ways of explaining things. Even the simple assertion that *Christ died for our sins* might raise more questions than resolve them. We might struggle to believe that the Death of Jesus did dramatically alter something in the cosmic scheme of things yet alone our own particular lives.

“The crucified Jesus is no stranger” is the title of a book written by the Dominican Sebastian Moore several years ago. Moore is suggesting that we need to approach the mystery of the cross not as something that only happens to Jesus at a dim point in history, nor is only about some supernatural realignment of the cosmos. The notion that the best explanation of the death of Jesus is primarily about satisfying God's need for justice is truly limited, if not completely wrong. So to, the belief that Jesus' death serves as some kind of atonement for the sins of humankind has been found to be wanting. These theories tend to render God as both limited and malicious. God becomes an angry God, demanding some sort of justice, or forced into striking a deal with the devil! Rather, the problem is us—more precisely the millennial reiterations of violence, sin and death. For Moore, the “justice” of the cross is the confrontation with the violence and injustice of the world. The Cross is a symbolic proclamation rather than a transactional engagement between God and Creation. Somewhere along the way, I began to wonder if we were making too much of the suffering of Jesus, given how much so many humans suffer. Is the death of Jesus more tragic than that of a woman shot to death as she sits at her

kitchen table, or any other of the random deaths in the violent neighborhoods of our cities? Can the suffering of Jesus even approach the suffering of the people in Gaza? If we contemplate the suffering of Jesus in isolation from all who suffer, we are in danger of missing an important dimension of this mystery. The Crucifixion shows us everything that is wrong with the world, and calls us, asking us, even for a few moments, to stand in awareness of the tragedy in so many of its forms in human history. At the same time, it asks us to behold the determination of Jesus to face this tragedy and God's vindication of life beyond death shows us and for creation to be made whole.

Over the past few months, I have been participating in a series of experiences in the Sacred Ground project, along with many other folks from St. Peter's and beyond. The confrontation with the pernicious history of racial prejudice and systemic white supremacy—for those of us who have been privileged by our white identification—authentically induce shame and horror. But should we feel a sense of guilt for what we did not create and did not control? How can we repair what cries out for justice and reparation? It has dawned on me that, as with the death of Jesus, it is not about either indulging our feelings of guilt. Nor is it about escaping the bad feelings that come with the awareness of how implicated all of us are as a people in the destructive forces of history. But guilt is rather useless unless it can lead to change and can even be a somewhat self-indulgent feeling that prevents us from taking action. Through awareness and commitment, we are made more authentic witnesses to what others have suffered. Human beings tend to avoid looking at what brings us shame, what makes us helpless, or what frightens us. It's just that, until we can look squarely at these things, whether inside of us or around us, nothing changes. And can we, as they say, "take the hit" of facing what we would rather not have to face.

Remember the story of Moses mounting the serpent for all to see. Sometimes the only way to become whole is to look unflinchingly at what threatens to destroy us. We face the pain so that we might be healed. We face our shame rather than hide from it. We are here today as embodied witnesses, who hold the death or the Lord deep within our beings-- witnesses to the tragedies which have shaped our lives and the lives of others, who are willing to face the cross and it's shame, realizing that it not only stands for the death of Jesus but for the death of all who have been abandoned and abused by other human beings. And we not only face the cross but look out from the cross to see how God sees the world and all who suffer.

Today, as on every Sunday, we will gather at the table for communion, as the cross of Jesus stands closely by. Bread which is blessed and broken—symbolizing a world which is both blessed and broken. Sharing the common cup of the New Covenant in Christ. As Paul might say: Is not our communion a communion in the body of Christ? And is not the body of Christ not only those who gather at the table, but even all those who are seemingly beyond the pale? That's why these events of Holy Week are the intense immersion into what we celebrate every time we have Eucharist. At the core of our belief is this holding of the suffering and the death of Christ, And while God invites us to bring our own personal suffering to the table, we are also called to imagine the discarded bodies and souls of all who suffer—more often than not from the greed, corruption and violence of human beings. God does not abandon us, or anyone else in God's creation, for it is with our very nature—by virtue of Christ—to be brought from death into life. Even Easter doesn't leave the Passion of the Lord behind, but transforms it into a bedrock of our life in Christ. By virtue of our baptism, we die with Christ that we might live with Christ and surrender to the hands of the One who brings us to the fullness of life.

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