

Good Friday

John 19: 1 – 37

What does Jesus' death mean to us? It's hard to get beyond the emotional import of what happens here, but I think that more than the synoptic gospels, John's version of the death on the cross tries to do just that. This passage from John doesn't focus on the horrible suffering of the savior so much as it does on the difference that it makes in the lives of believers. On the other hand, John does not try to downplay the reality of Jesus' death. Rather, today's gospel reading "expresses the remarkable way in which one of the ancient world's most grisly symbols of cruelty was transformed into a symbol of God's power,"¹ and love. John takes us on a journey rich with symbolism in which we are taught to understand Jesus' death in a sacramental way. For the author of this gospel, things, words, and actions mean much more than what they say on the surface. When our lives are shaped by God's love in the giving of his Son for us, we begin to see signs in our own life that point to God.

Looming large in this gospel is the contrast between God's power and the power of the world. John seems to be asking us which of these will ultimately have dominion over us. Pilate asks Jesus if he is unaware that Pilate has the power to crucify him. "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above." The truth in Jesus' reply is found in the very next verse, in which Pilate wants to release Jesus but is unable to do so. Choices are being made here by: the Jewish leaders, the soldiers,

¹ Johnson, Luke Timothy. "Cross and Crucifixion." Hastings, Adrian (gen. ed.) *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) p. 146

Pilate, and of course, the people, choices about what power will guide their actions. **T**he cross reveals what humanity is capable of when we believe that the world's power, the surface meaning of life, is all that we see. **P**ower in the world is never what it seems, and God's power is always more than it appears to be.

In John's Passion narrative, those guided by the world's ideals seek to honor either themselves or those who can bring them honor in return. **T**hose whose identity is the crucified Christ, however, seek to give of themselves completely, holding nothing back.

When attacked or threatened, those of this world seek to protect themselves by shaming their accuser, whereas those guided by Truth offer mercy because they have been shown mercy by the Father. **I**n other words, whatever drives us, whatever our most fundamental desire is, becomes evident in the choices that we make. **J**ohn's gospel tells us that these drives, these powers are only two: love of God or love of self. **T**he good news is this: the world's power can be, and is in fact, transformed by Christ's self-giving love and mercy.

Now, the whole story of the Passion in John is full of strange and ironic inversions of thought. **T**he murder of the world's savior is turning everything upside down, inside out, and every other way in which it was not before. **I**n Christ, the world's ultimate sign of humiliation is changed to exaltation. **J**esus refers to the cross throughout this gospel as his being lifted up. **T**he shame of his trial and death should have deprived Jesus of everything – first status, possessions, and friends, and finally, his life itself. **B**ut in fact it “draws all people to him,” and much greater life will he have in just a few days. **T**he Temple leaders found Jesus deserving of death because he “claims to be the son of God.” **T**hey knew that

in 1st century imperial Roman society, this was a term reserved, believe it or not, for Caesar alone. **P**ilate retorts to their challenge by mocking both Jesus and the Jewish leaders with the sign on the cross declaring him the King of the Jews. **T**he self-serving powers of the world are fighting for their honor, and the one who seeks nothing for himself is hated by both. **J**esus as king is used by both sides to mock the other, and yet, the titles king and son of God are known by the reader to be true. **A**gain, things are not what they seem – they are much more.

In our translation, Jesus’ death is signified by his giving up of his spirit, but the Greek manuscripts actually say that he gave up “the” spirit, perhaps in reference to the Holy Spirit. **T**hen, “One of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out.” **M**ost commentaries suggest that what we are presented with here are the sacraments – the body and blood of the Eucharist and the water of baptism. **S**o with the spirit that comes from Jesus in his death also comes the sacraments, connecting our lives with God in Christ in a way that transcends time and space, and joins us to Him in this very minute.

How often do we consider the sacramental nature of our life?

The BCP describes a sacrament as an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. **S**o it makes a connection, it points us to God. **A** sacrament is a thin place in which the distance between the seen and unseen, between time and eternity, between God and humanity, shrinks to obscurity. **P**articipation in a sacrament can, if we let it, make us aware of our presence with God, and in some mysterious way, communicates something of God’s love back to us. **O**ne of the many blessings that the gospels hold for us is that they show us how to absorb the life, death, and

resurrection of Christ in a deeper way, in a sacramental way. **T**he depth of symbolic richness directs us from the ordinary to the extraordinary, from reading life at face value to seeing life as pointing to a greater Truth.

And yet, Christ hangs upon the cross. **G**od's hidden-ness is piercing, God's apparent absence unbearable. **T**here are times when all of feel Gods absence. **W**e watch family and friends suffer and die. **N**atural and unnatural disasters claim multiple lives for no apparent reason. **A**nd children lay starving to death, wondering if anyone cares. **N**othing could be more real than this space in which God does not seem to be. **S**o where is God's power now?

What John is telling us today is that God is with us in that space, as real as any pain we can feel, as real as any fear that can grip us. **C.S.** Lewis talked about God's hidden-ness with amazing clarity. **H**e writes, "The hidden-ness of God perhaps presses most painfully on those who are in another way nearest to Him, and therefore God Himself, made man, will of all men be by God most forsaken." **A**nd finally, Barbara Brown Taylor talks about the lesson that the cross teaches us about God's power. "**I**t is not the power to force human choices or to end human pain. **I**t is instead the power to pick up the shattered pieces and make something holy out of them – not from a distance, but right up close. **T**hat is the power of a suffering God, not to prevent pain but to redeem it, by going through it with us." **T**hings are not what they seem – they are much more.