

Matthew 27:11-54

The Passion

Who is God?

What has God done?

What does God want me to do?

These questions were put to me and my seminary colleagues by a lifelong missionary in chapel several years ago, as the three most important questions in life a person can ask. The first two of these questions are central in the observance of Lent, Holy Week, and Easter.

Who is God?

What has God done?

Some things speak for themselves. The execution of Jesus is like that. Imagine reading the story without knowing the ending: the preaching about the good news of the Kingdom; the teaching about love and mercy and inner peace; and all those powerful deeds, the healings and exorcisms and resuscitations; all of it making Jesus influential among the people. Then the resistance from the authorities. Like anything, adversity comes and must be overcome. For Jesus, the expectation right up to the very end, was a victory over the powerful forces in his way. In the end the powerful forces won. He died. Darkness engulfed the land.

As common as executions are, they are not so common that people ever get used to them, are ever able to ignore them as if they have no significance. Wherever there is death, there is darkness. There is silence. In this one unjust death, however, something happened that is outside the ordinary.

The Context

It is not possible to separate this execution from its Jewish context. More than any other, the Jewish people had reflected upon their tragic history. They had written about it and passed the writings down through many generations.

They thought about the creative power of God and the mystery of life.

They thought about the contradictions and disharmonies that bring pain and suffering into human experience.

They thought about issues of justice - the meaning of right and wrong - and were aware of their own failures, their responsibility for sin and its consequences.

They tried on for size the idea that God is a jealous God, righteous and good but demanding and vindictive

and imposing a high standard of conduct on a people who seemed never to have been able to measure up.

I do not mean to over simplify the sense that God was to them a harsh and judgmental God looking for vengeance, distant and forbidding, because I do not believe that is true. They had a stronger idea of God's love and mercy than they have been given credit.

But the cross of Christ presents something new and unique that had never happened before. The people of Judea and Galilee, the Jews and the Gentiles, the Temple leaders and the Roman soldiers, the ordinary people and the wealthy elites; they all had seen executions before and in one way or another coped with them.

But over time this one execution turned out to be different; more ground-breaking, earth-shattering, almost time/space continuum breaking, more transforming than any other before or since because it gave a stronger sense of God's grace than they had known.

The Story

Those who witnessed this tragedy tell of how they met Jesus along the way; fishermen and tax collectors, men and women making ends meet and taking care of

daily chores, hoping for a meaningful life and a better world. They spoke of encounters with the sick who were healed, the sorrowful who were comforted, and the dead even, upon occasion, who were raised.

They tell of confrontations with religious and civic leaders which did not always turn out well; about how Jesus increasingly fell out of favor with them because he called for authentic faith and compassion and justice, and he made outlandish claims about his relationship with God.

Finally he was arrested and interrogated, beaten, mocked, and tortured, publicly humiliated and killed like a criminal. You have heard the story as it has been read this morning. You know its principle features.

If we are to understand its meaning, then we must at least try to put our feet in the shoes of those who witnessed this execution without knowing about the resurrection. Only then can we understand the truth about it and why it is so unique among all the world's deaths.

Reach down to that inner place in each of us where there is a miraculous memory of this one death. Picture it. We are not sure what he looked like but he was a human being and that is all we need to know.

And each of us has seen enough and maybe even experienced enough pain and suffering to know at least a little about what human suffering looks like. Imagine that.

The Meaning of it All

Picture the scene before Pilate, and Antipas. Picture the scarlet robe and the crown of thorns and the whip they tortured him with. Listen to the childish jokes they made, “He saved others, but he can’t save himself.”

Hear the words of Jesus from the cross,

“My God, why have you forsaken me?”

See the crowds that welcomed him with joy and then turned on him when he failed to meet their expectations.

See the miserable scene at the cross.

There is the answer to our questions. Who is God? What has God done? There is God. That is what God has done.

What does God want us to do? Listen to the call:

the call for personal devotion; to believe in the victory of life over death, goodness over evil, hope over despair, to love and give and serve

And the call to work for the transformation of our society; for compassion and kindness and courage, for honesty, even when it does not benefit us, to seek the truth when we can’t agree on what the truth is, to suspend judgment and to seek justice.

Living up to that example and calling is enough to keep us busy the rest of our lives. But we are not called alone, but together into a wonderful fellowship that challenges us and sustains us along the way, as we march toward Easter.

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