

Luke 23:44-49  
April 14, 2019

## The Death of Jesus

One of the definitions of “irony” is, “a literary technique, or event in which what appears, on the surface, to be the case, differs radically from what is actually the case. The literal meaning of the word is, “dissimulation,” which refers to the concealment of one’s thoughts. But irony is not an attempt to hide anything, rather to show it forth by exposing the meaning that lies beneath the surface.

There is hardly a possibility of anything in any setting being more ironic than Palm Sunday. The triumph of a coronation and the tragedy of an execution; the feeling that everything is coming together followed so closely by the realization that everything is falling apart; the naive hopefulness set next to devastating despair; the whole story is filled with irony.

Because next Sunday celebrates the victory of Easter, there are actually two liturgies for the day: the observation of the entry into the city with its “hail to the king” processional and coronation theme; and the Passion, the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus.

There is double irony; on the surface hopeful and expectant, just underneath tragic and despondent. But even deeper than that, more victorious.

The contradiction is so profound that it is almost easier to deny it, or ignore it somehow, separating the two ideas, making Palm Sunday into a Triumphal Entry

with no knowledge that underneath the surface lies a catastrophe. And then to treat the coming week the same as any other, showing up next Sunday for the victory of Easter without suffering the trauma of the events in-between.

Let us resist the temptation to skip the middle part with its pain and inhumanity and injustice. It is the suffering that gives meaning to the victory and allows us to look deeply into it and rethink the whole sequence of events, rethink the way we understand the world.

## Philippians 2:5-11

The epistle reading for the day is from Philippians, and one must take the opportunity to reflect on the great Christ Hymn in the 2nd chapter of St. Paul’s letter. In it is presented an ethic of sacrifice. We are told not to look only after our own interests, but also to the interests of others; in fact, to consider others better than ourselves, doing nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit.

And then we are blessed and challenged by this poetic interpretation of Christ’s sacrifice, and instructed to live our lives by the same attitude of mind.

“Being in *very nature* God,  
(Christ) did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing,

taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And, being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.

This lyric from this old hymn sets us against the values of the “world,” as we like to call it, the society that human beings have made. A set of values that tells us to look after our own interests because no one else will. It tells us to consider ourselves better than others, our race is better, our religion is better, our country is better.

It holds up pride as a virtue, monetary wealth as a goal, and other people as competitors and obstacles. As if we suffer a lack of self-esteem forcing us to build ourselves up by tearing others down.

The example of Christ is the opposite of all that. Part of the irony is that the world killed Jesus, as he said it would us. But there it is, read and behold, and remember that we bear the title, “Christian,” that is, “little Christs.”

## The Death

And remember that the death of Jesus was no ordinary death, although in a sense all deaths are very similar. Death is death and everyone dies one. But as deaths goes this one stands out because it was the execution of a criminal, the most disgraceful and shameful of all deaths, and the most ironic because he was innocent of the charges.

Jesus wasn't the first innocent person to be executed and wasn't the last, but it is worthy of note that of all the different kinds of deaths one could die, when God became human, it was *this* kind, the *most* enigmatic, the *most* shameful, the *most* ironic of all.

Perhaps there is no more important a task than for believers and for the world at large to simply to behold the irony of this one innocent man's death at the hands of the state. It challenges whatever easy notions we have about the possibilities of our own goodness. Even though we still encourage and advocate worldly success as a goal, it is secondary goal, and must be subordinated to the example of Christ. Success is not worth the loss of the soul.

## The Meanings

So as we are, in our mind's eye, taking in the death of Jesus, we should reflect upon the following ideas:

The human chasing after moral perfection, or perfection of any kind, is an illusion. We are able to imagine much more than we are able to achieve. The irony is that nearly all human attempts at goodness are accompanied by un-intended side-effects often much worse than what the intended good is trying to overcome. However one explains it, the doctrine of Sin is an accurate assessment of human nature.

We must also conclude that the death of Jesus reveals the ethic of sacrifice and love as superior to any other way of understanding right and wrong. To act on

someone's behalf, to suffer in their place, has tremendous moral value. We move beyond the idea that actions are right or wrong in themselves, to the moral conclusion that they are endowed with meaning and power when they are *for* someone; A great deal of meaning is attached to human behavior when it is regarded as *for someone*, and not just for the self.

The cross is an expression of divine love, which is presented to us as the dominant characteristic of God's nature. Love and forgiveness are real and constitute the fabric of our existence. Thus, we regard every person as precious because there is no person outside the reach of God's sacrificial love. Meaning comes from relationships and forgiveness is the glue that holds them together.

Moral statements like,

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you  
Love your neighbor as yourself  
Love your enemies  
It is more blessed to give than to receive, as well as  
Be kind and compassionate, forgiving each other as in  
Christ, God has forgiven you  
Do not judge . . .

and many more, show forth the "Christ" ethic in all its grandeur and with the vastness of its reach.

The best thing to do this Holy Week, is to view the death of Jesus, not saying too much, take it in, to believe in it, letting it leave its mark on us.

The Stubborn presence of Sin; the ethic of sacrifice and love; the stubborn presence of forgiveness; the intrinsic value of every person; all combined with the conviction of life under grace, they are all squeezed into this one moment in time when the great irony happened, and the king offered his life as a sacrifice for those who took his life from him.

This is the death of Jesus: foolishness to some, scandal to others, but to those being saved, the power of God. Could there be anything more ironic?

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