

Readings for Palm Sunday

It's That Whole Human Thing...

As we head into Holy Week, I remember my son asking me some time ago, during one of his intermittent agnostic periods, "OK—If God is so powerful, how could he let his son die—and so horribly? That's your 'loving God?' I don't think so!"

I had to hand it to him—this was a tough question to answer. And it's been a tough question down through the centuries, a question around which Christian theologians from Augustine and Anselm on through Hildegard, to Aquinas, and on to Weil, Rahner and Gutiérrez have huddled and debated.

These ancient, medieval and contemporary theologians have devised various vocabularies for expressing the meaning and necessity of Jesus' death: Sacrificial Atonement, Divine Victory, Propitiation and Penal Substitution, among others.

But perhaps there is a more simple, less esoteric explanation that might help us most appreciate, and actually learn from, the living and dying of Jesus.

We tend to think of Jesus on the cross as "The sinless Son of God dying for sinful men." Yes, there was the sinless Jesus, and there is the sinfulness of humankind—even renowned atheists like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins would find it hard to dispute the well-documented goodness of Jesus and the self-destructive behavior of humans. But, if we look only at generic "sin" and the self-effacing death of Jesus in a simplistic cause/effect equation, we all too easily miss some complex truths about Jesus, and of humanity, truths that lie at the core of the powerful experiences we celebrate during Holy Week and the Sacred Triduum.

It's just too easy to think of Jesus on the cross as "God dying for us." As beautiful and poetically compelling the thought of the Creator God dying for His creatures may be, we forget that it was not just the God essence of Jesus that died on the cross.

It was Jesus, the man.

The man who grew from innocent child to surly adolescent (think of his perfectly teen-aged "Duh...Where did you two expect I'd be!?!?" retort to his parents when they asked him where he'd been during the Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem), The man who got calluses and splinters in his father's carpentry shop. The man who lived, loved and laughed with his friends, friends whom he trusted and by whom he was ultimately denied and betrayed. The fully divine, fully human man who felt every emotion that we do. The man who summoned every ounce of his human compassion to forgive the very murderers who executed him, and to welcome the criminal crucified beside him into his compassionate embrace.

Of course GOD would forgive his executioners and welcome criminals into his company--that's what GOD does.

But we are left too easily off the hook if we see the forgiveness and compassion with which Jesus lived and died as merely divine, super-human acts. It was the beaten, tortured man who forgave his betrayers, his torturers, not some faceless, ethereal "divine essence" that pardoned his tormentors. Jesus' forgiveness was not a super-human act--it was a *fully*-human act, a choice made by a human to NOT retaliate, to not seek revenge. A choice placed before us as the ultimate test of our true discipleship. A path that we know humans CAN walk, because Jesus, the human, *did* walk it.

So again, the question--Why did Jesus have to die? Does the answer have to be "theological?" Could it be simply that death is what happens when humans become pawns in socio-political struggles orchestrated by other humans who seek only their own advancement and who are willing to use any form of torture and violence to achieve it?

And when we think of "the sin of mankind" as the cause of Jesus' death, we again let ourselves off way too easily. Acknowledging only some generic sin, original or unoriginal, doesn't really challenge us to look at the very specific sins that brought about Jesus' death.

Was it Adam who sent Roman legions to Palestine to subdue, occupy and oppressively tax the Jewish people who themselves had spent centuries trying to subdue and occupy *their* neighbors, all for the sole purpose of supporting the lifestyle of their nation on the backs of another? Was it Eve who instilled in the religious leaders of Jesus' time an incendiary jealousy of the genuine authority and simple authenticity with which he spoke? Was it an original sin that made Judas think for a moment that Jesus' mission of forgiveness and reconciliation was just too impractical in the "real world?" Was it some ancient human/divine debt that caused a crowd to say on one Sunday "Hail, Son of David--and later that week "Crucify him?"

If we focus on the debt Jesus paid for Adam's archetypal transgression, we are pretty much spectators, out of the equation, except to say "Hey, thanks, Jesus, for the Redemption and all...good job!" Perhaps the challenge of Holy Week is for us to not simply profess that Jesus died for the generic sinfulness of humanity, but to bold-facedly call ourselves on the very specific sins of subjugation, exploitation, power-clinging, practicality-reverencing, and conviction-waffling that have gotten us into a place a bit more sophisticated, but really not so different from first century Palestine.

With that essential humility, we may truly rise from the culture of death which we Catholics so frequently bemoan, to build a true culture of life which takes the living, dying and rising of Jesus as a model of how we move not only to our divine essence, but to our most truly human. Perhaps God didn't send his son so that we mortals could act more divine. Maybe the Son took on flesh, lived, and died to show us how to be more human.

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