

Holy Friday 2014

“For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried”.

These words from the Nicene Creed express the Christian Church’s faith and experience that what happened on that first Good Friday- Jesus’ crucifixion, death and burial- was for *our sake*. Significantly, the Creed, the Church’s Rule of Faith, says nothing more about this. It doesn’t try to explain or to explicate or to analyze what this “*for our sake*” means. It simply affirms that the suffering and death of Jesus has something to do with us, that the suffering and death of Jesus has, in some sense, *ultimate significance* for us. Together with the claim that “God raised Jesus from the dead”, the most frequent and most important faith-statement in the New Testament and in the primitive Christian tradition was that “Christ has died for us”. And it has been left to Christian theology and worship and spiritual life and experience to reflect on how you and I might understand the way in which Good Friday touches us and draws us towards and into what we perceive as having ultimate value and significance.

There are, of course, various ways in which the suffering and death of Jesus have been understood by Christians-

- sometimes as what is called a “vicarious atonement” in which Jesus in our place takes the punishment from God that we deserve;
- sometimes as the means by which God reaches down to rescue us from the bondage of sin, death and the power of the evil one;

- sometimes as a model and exemplar of what authentic faith and trust in God looks like.

Each of these ways of understanding what was happening on Good Friday spoke and made sense to the people of the age in which these ideas were developed. I wonder, however, how much sense they actually make to us today, and whether, while still affirming the “*for our sake*” dogmatic affirmation of the Church, we need a way to understand the meaning of Jesus’ suffering and death that can speak into our own world and into our own framework of life. There may, of course, be various ways to talk about the ultimate significance of Good Friday for human beings, but let me suggest just one.

What happened to Jesus on Good Friday means that we need to dump all of our gods- that is, dump all of the ways in which we have conceived of God which are projections of ourselves. This is, I think, really hard to do, but it is necessary if we are can open ourselves up to the mystery of the real God who reveals Himself not in power but in vulnerability and powerlessness. In some ways, our contemporary sensibilities incline us to affirm that there is only one Divine Reality behind all the gods, and all the religions, and all the religious philosophies of the world- we’re all like blind men and women feeling a huge elephant but from different angles-, and in a sense, this must be true if there is indeed one Ultimate Reality. In another sense, however, a suffering, vulnerable God revealed in a deserted, despised crucified man does seem to be quite different from a whole bunch of other gods in the religious marketplace, different especially from, say, Thor, my own personal god-of-choice.

It is also true that many of the other great founders of religious traditions- Moses, Buddha, Muhammad- died in honored old age. Jesus' near contemporary, the wonder-worker Apollonios of Tyana, with whom Jesus is sometimes compared by scholars of world religions, is said to have faced voluntarily the prospect of his martyrdom under the Emperor Domitian, but at the last minute Apollonios was magically spirited away in the course of his trial because it was not fitting that a "divine man" should be executed. All of this is so very different from the narratives about Jesus.

Jesus was killed in middle life, apparently rejected by both God and human society. The one who had spoken with so much authority and who saw himself as having "come from God and going back to God" ended his life in utter powerlessness. Crucifixion was not only a brutal and painful way to die, but it was also a terribly shameful way to die. It was the way slaves or felons might be executed, and for the Jews, crucifixion was a sign of God's rejection, because according to Torah a man hanged on a tree was "accursed by God". The idea of a crucified Messiah was a blasphemous oxymoron. Nor would any ancient Greek or Roman have regarded crucifixion, a squalid and ignominious way to end a human life, as a means by which a man could then be deified, could achieve apotheosis after his death, as Greeks and Romans believed had happened to several of their emperors.

All of this suggests, I believe, that Good Friday is about God going to the utmost, going to the brink, in order to convert us, in order to get us to realize that we have been radically wrong about what God is actually like, and then by implication, to realize how

we have also been radically wrong in how we understand what God is asking us to be and to do.

Like St. Paul before his conversion on the road to Damascus, we human beings, especially we religious human beings, have generally and rather readily used religion and the idea of God as a way of projecting ourselves *onto* and *over* others and the world as a means of control and domination. As soon as we affirm *God* as “all-powerful”, which in some sense is undoubtedly true, we, nonetheless, very quickly corrupt our image of God and make it into the image of *our own* lust for power. We have all in one way or another remade *God in our own image*. The history of nearly all religion- Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and yes even gentle Buddhism, not to mention both atheism and the more primitive forms of religion- have all at one time or another been tarnished with violence and oppression and coercion. It’s a human problem, so before we get on a high horse with regard to our own innocence and purity, we should realize that this isn’t just about “them”, the “bad guys”. It is also about us, about you and me. We too can so easily project ourselves onto the skies and remake God in our own image and likeness. We too can use religion or politics or economics or education or social status as a way of dominating, coercing, and presenting *ourselves* as of ultimate significance.

Good Friday with the suffering and death of Jesus is certainly a disclosure of what the scriptures call the “sin of the world”. It reveals how easily religion and politics and law and public opinion and a moral sense can all conspire against the presence of the real

God. As we look at the lonely and deserted crucified Jesus and ponder the significance of his death, we need to ask ourselves what we see: A good man, like so many good men and women before him and after him, finally caught and destroyed by the system? A man of megalomaniac pretensions, who eventually got the come-uppance he deserved? Or, is he the salvation of the world? Only God, of course, can finally and ultimately answer that question. Christians believe that God has indeed done so, in the wee hours of Sunday morning. . . but that's getting ahead of the story.

To be converted *from* all our self-made and projected images of God and to be converted *to* the God broken open and breaking into this world on Good Friday is a devastating conversion, because it is being converted to the image of a God who is not *over us*, but *under us*. It's being converted to a God spat upon by priests and who was a barrack-joke for soldiers, a God who was finally nailed to two bits of wood and hated by those trained in the God of law and purity. Good Friday is the unbelievable invitation to begin to allow ourselves to be converted to the God who is a "fellow sufferer who understands us", to allow ourselves to be disorientated, dismantled and broken apart by this God, so *that* we can fall in love with the humiliated One whom the real God has raised up, the God who comes to us from *below* in order to liberate the tender self in us that we have oppressed so that we can dominate others. Good Friday is about the God who has stretched out his arms between heaven and earth and who sneaks up behind us through the cross so that we won't take fright, so that we might sink into his arms and let him feed us with his body and blood, so that He might turn us slowly into himself, so that we might learn how to live in mercy and compassion and a new and enduring love.