

Palm Sunday, Year A
The Passion According to Matthew
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It is remarkable that the impetus for Christianity arose not from the peaceful meditations of an elderly sage contemplating the vagaries of life, as in many religions, but from a horrible, violent death, and – we must add – from theological interpretations of that horrible, violent death. If therefore we are to understand our own faith and even the character of the God we worship, we must come to grips in one way or another with that death, which is why Palm Sunday is so important.

That is a harder task than it appears, for the entire tradition of which we are a part, a tradition that stems back not just to Jesus, but to the Abrahamic sagas of Genesis, evinces a profound ambivalence about the character of God, and we all know it. On the one hand God is loving and kind and completely forgiving. On the other hand God is harsh, judgmental and violent. The suggestion that this ambivalence is restricted to the Old Testament is refuted both by even the most casual reading of the New Testament as well as the actual trajectory of Christian history right up to today. Individually of course we all have our beliefs which we each render consistent through a careful editing of our tradition. Collectively we demonstrate this ambivalence through the welter of different views about God and Jesus, and Jesus' death. Yet, that ambivalence is

not in my view a problem. Rather, it is part of how we come to understand the importance of Jesus' death.

We can begin with that most common of notions, that the death of Jesus was a "sacrifice." It is completely understandable that our whole tradition would start here, because Jesus' death was instantly seen by the Jewish people who loved him and followed him in the context of the Jewish sacrificial system centered in the Temple in Jerusalem. Yet even this simple statement illuminates our tradition's ambivalence about God. Part of the tradition declares that in spite of all appearances God does not require sacrifices of us, but something else entirely. Psalm 51 tells us "You have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken Spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." Psalm 50 is less poetic, but says the same thing: "Offer to God a sacrifice of Thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High."

The whole prophetic tradition takes this concept much farther, declaring that God does not want sacrifice, but rather wants justice. Isaiah begins on this note, declaring "I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the bloods of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats." Instead God calls upon the people to "learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." So, hundreds of years before Jesus people within the tradition are actively questioning whether or not

God demands blood, and saying: “No, the God of love, the God of justice does not demand blood, but rather demands a transformed heart.”

We are the inheritors of that ambivalence that is itself enshrined in our tradition, an ambivalence which on the one hand built the most elaborate sacrificial system the world has yet seen, and which on the other critiqued that very system so harshly as to demand its complete overthrow. Therefore after two thousand years I beg you to see that question is still with us. Do you believe the character of God is such that He demands blood? Is the death of Jesus a sacrifice offered by God to God for the sins of the world? Is that what the death of Jesus means to you? Or does that death mean something else, and say something else? Asking that question puts you in the middle of a quest that has been going on for 3,500 years.

In no small part because I was born smack dab in the middle of the most violent century in human history I have come to the belief with Isaiah and the psalmist that God does not require blood sacrifice, but rather, we do. Thus, though I do believe that the death of Jesus was a sacrifice, I don't believe that God demanded it, I believe that we did. I say this simply by looking at the accounts of what happened and comparing it with the way life is today. And in that comparison, and not in some sacrifice offered to God, is the meaning for me, and I emphasize that it is for me, of Christ's death, and the how that death contributes to our redemption.

The difficult truth is that Jesus was not killed by people who were intent upon overturning either God's law or civil society. On the contrary, Jesus was killed by people whose highest concern was God's law and civil society. They truly believed they were not only right, but righteous. Getting rid of Jesus was eliminating someone who was an affront to the majesty of Roman law and order, and an even greater affront to the majesty of God. Had we heard this story only from the point of view of the Roman Tacitus or the High Priest Caiaphas, we would have believed that. But we didn't hear the story from them, we heard it from the point of view of those who most loved him. From their perspective we learned that Jesus was not a destroyer of civil society or of religion, but rather he was the very face and presence of God.

Nothing could ever dramatize or expose the lost condition of humanity better than that. In the name of the very God we claim to love and worship, we kill the one who is the face and presence of that God. I cannot imagine how the truth of the human condition could be made better known than that. We are so lost, so confused, that in the name of God we try to destroy God. Christ's death, therefore, when understood from the Christian point of view, and that is crucial, is the most important event in history, because it reveals as nothing else ever has or ever could the nature of human sin and the deepness of the estrangement between God and humanity. If you don't accept the Christian story, then you don't get this point out of it, because you don't think Christ is the face of God.

But if you do accept the Christian story then everything becomes clear, and humanity is unmasked once and for all.

Because to accept the truth of the Christian story is to be transformed at once, for the Christian story gives us the way of understanding the sweep of human violence. Think about all the genocidal campaigns of the past couple hundred years. Every one of them was advertised as a humanitarian effort, ridding the world of impediments to progress. It is absolutely awful to contemplate, but the reason it is so awful is that the spell of Christ crucified is upon us, and the world is slowly learning to look at violence from the point of view of the victims, and to see in our victims where God is when we do this. Because of Christ crucified we know where God was during the Holocaust. God was not in the Christians who gassed the Jews and burned their bodies, the crucifixion of Jesus tells us that God was in and with the Jews who died. We know that now because Christ taught us how to read that story. And when you read the story that way it has to change you, it has to turn you away from that horrible violence, and the equally horrible justification for it, and turn you into a new person who no longer can make victims, no longer justify dehumanizing violence but instead seeks justice and peace.

That is the sense in which I believe that Christ died "for us." He died that we might know the truth, and knowing the truth, repent of our dehumanizing violence and the ways we justify it, and discover and accept the reconciling presence of God. We can't learn that lesson without that death; I don't know

why, but we just can't. So Christ had to die, but not because God demanded a blood sacrifice for sin, but because we demanded a blood sacrifice for our own sense of order. But having died, he showed us the truth about us and our order, and so overcame the world.

This in the end is why I know God is not violent, and does not demand blood. God subjected himself to us in order that we might renounce violence forever, and learn to live with each other as God has lived with us. So the death of Jesus is the crucial step in the ultimate redemption of the world. He died that we might know the truth, and knowing the truth be set free.