

From Parades to Passion

In many ways, this week has been an emotional roller coaster for our nation.

On the one hand, we had the great joy yesterday of seeing so many of our nation's youth standing up for life in Washington DC, as they demand that guns be regulated in ways to reduce the slaughter occurring in our schools; and all of this coming from a generation who seemed far too self-absorbed, far too much into their phones and snapchats, to begin a movement such as this.

Yet there they were, moving mountains!

On the other hand, there was the week-long terror in Austin, Texas, where a 24 year old man, for reasons still unknown, made bombs and shipped them off to various people and places, killing some, wounding others, frightening an entire city; only to blow himself up when police finally tracked him down.

These are just two examples of the joys and horrors of our world, joys and horrors that are often mirrored in our individual lives.

While some prepare for the excitement of graduation or new jobs, others, of similar age and hopes, like Auntie Lani's niece, are diagnosed with terminal disease.

Joy and horror.

These are our bookends for today.

Our service begins with a raucous parade and the belting out of All Glory Laud and Honor, but then, in a flash, we move to the long and bitter passion story, which ends with Jesus being laid in the tomb.

From rock star to dead imposter, all within the span of a day or two; and we shall depart today not with songs of glory, but with "Oh sacred head sore wounded, defiled and put to scorn."

Not so long ago, Palm Sunday was all about the glory.

We only celebrated the parade, that triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and then, most of us went home, only to return the following Sunday for Easter!

Not long ago, for the vast majority in the church, the story of Jesus' last days went not from glory to oblivion, but from glory to glory, from the palm waving parade to the Risen Lord now seated at the right hand of the Father!

That's because only a few take part in the Maundy Thursday services of foot washing and altar stripping, and fewer still turn out for the dark night of the soul, Good Friday, as our Lord lay in the tomb.

In a sense, our American civil religion is based on this fiction - where Jesus is transformed from the Jewish suffering servant who dies for all people, into a kind of lily white Rambo Jesus who carries our flag and sings our songs and supports our wars.

One woman left one of our sister churches last week lamenting the fact that we now read the Passion after the Palm Sunday march, because back when it was just Palm Sunday, it was so much fun!

But you don't have to live life for very long to realize that life isn't always fun; and when you realize that, you are close to coming to understand the power of the cross.

For truth be told, "the gospel is the only thing that makes sense of a world that is at once so ugly, and yet so beautiful.

After the horrors of the holocaust, a Jewish man says the only God he can believe in is one who knows first hand what it's like to be a Jewish child buried alive; one who knows what it's like to be a Jewish mother watching her child die.

The cross reveals that God knows all about these abominations, firsthand, and uses them to save the world.

The death of Jesus on the cross shows us something we never thought possible.

In his death, God absorbs the poison of our worst selves, and by surrendering to the unspeakable evil that we inflict upon Jesus, God, through our Lord's surrender, transforms death into life." Garland, The NIV Application Commentary, 606, paraphrased.

Coming to grips with my personal role in all of this is hard, but it's necessary.

It's tempting to be like the fellow who leaves the Passion Sunday service, whispering to the priest: "I just can't say: 'crucify him,'" thinking he's one of the good guys, yet he's totally missed the point of today.

When a famous author was asked to write a magazine article entitled "What's Wrong With The World," he responded with this:

"I am."

The passion of our Lord is a profound reminder that we are each of us the problem, slow to forgive, content to meet anger with anger, while rejecting the way of Jesus, a way that "soaks up injustice, evil and resentment, like venom from a snakebite, and then, unleashes the powerful forces of love and forgiveness." D. Garland, id at 583, paraphrased.

Only through deep humility can we see that truth, yet when we see it, we are set free.

It's hard to face the fact that we live in a dog eat dog world; that we love to bite!

There is only one remedy for people like us.

It is surrender.

Think about it, the quickest way to end a fight is to surrender; since it takes two to tango.

And while many will scoff at the need for surrender; whether by an individual, a clan or a nation, this is precisely what our faith calls us to do.

It's not me saying so, it's St. Paul, who says:

"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness."

"And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death -- even death on a cross." Phil. 2:5-7.

The poet W. H. Auden was once asked why he is a Christian, instead of a Buddhist or a Confucian, since the ethical values are all so similar.

He replies,

"Because nothing in the figure of Buddha or Confucius fills me with the overwhelming desire to scream, 'Crucify him!'"

When we honestly confront this God who gives up everything for us; when we honestly confess that forgiveness and mercy and humility define God, and that God begs each of us to embrace these difficult, some say impossible, virtues, then who isn't standing with Mr. Auden, screaming at the top of his lungs: "Crucify him!?"

We get Rambo Jesus when we insist that we are right and the other gal is wrong.

We get the Savior of humanity when we humbly accept that...

...."unless a seed dies, it remains but a single grain."

"unless you take up your cross...."

"turn the other cheek...."

Yes, surrender is the foundation on which our life in Christ is built.

Surrender is love in action.

"This is my blood, shed for many for the forgiveness of sins."

We are the many.

If we can embrace this truth, and be thankful for the forgiveness we receive, then perhaps that thankfulness, that gratitude, can allow us to forgive those who have hurt us, as individuals, as communities, even as a nation.

Because, our faith doesn't end at our own front door, nor is it limited to our private lives.

No!

Our faith insists that we believers take the gospel into the mall in Washington DC!

It demands that we take the gospel into our corporate board rooms!

And, Lord have mercy, our faith demands that we even take the gospel into the councils of the church!

Not the watered down, me and my pal Jesus; but the real gospel; the gospel that insists that the weakness of God, revealed in service, compassion and trust — is where we find life.

So on this day of joy and horror, on this day of bookends, may “the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”

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