

Ransom

One of the things that troubles many folks about Christianity is this idea that Jesus is sent as a ransom for us; that his suffering was willed by God, even more, that it was required by God.

And so comes the often heard objections: how can a loving God require the horror of crucifixion to mend God's relationship with humanity?

Isn't this a religion that has at its core, child abuse?

It's an idea that doesn't start with the life of Jesus, it's part and parcel of our whole Judaeo-Christian heritage.

It's there this morning in our reading from the prophet Isaiah, the song of the suffering servant, the one seemingly cursed by God, who suffers for all.

It's in the letter to the Hebrews this morning, as the writer ruminates on the long suffering high priest of God.

And of course it's there in the last lines of the gospel this morning, as Jesus reflects on his becoming a "ransom for many," his life in exchange for our freedom - but who's the kidnapper and who gets the benefit of the payment?

Many over the years have said the kidnapper and the one getting paid off is God.

Yet in our heart of hearts, we know that God is not cruel.

We know that a loving God never wishes harm to anyone, especially to his beloved son.

So how did we get into this conundrum?

Why do questions such as these persist over the millennia?

Perhaps because we give up too soon when we are invited into deep meditation on the nature of God.

And because we give up too soon, we end up with a sort of cartoon God, an explainable and defined God, and from there we get into all kinds of misunderstandings and mistakes about what's actually the truth of our faith.

I've been thinking a lot about these questions lately NOT because I have too much time on my hands NOR because I want to torture you with some heavy thinking on a Sunday morning, but because two men I deeply admire recently passed along a couple of books to me to read, both men enthusiastically recommending each of these books.

These two books both begin by arguing that we need to get rid of the dogma and creeds that, according to the authors, have messed up people's understanding of the Christian faith.

Get rid of dogmas like the Trinity, this notion that God is One yet Three yet One.

Get rid of the creeds, like the Nicene Creed, a creed we pray every Sunday right after the sermon, with its insistence that Jesus is true God, that he was born of a virgin, that he was raised from the dead, that he will come again.

“Out with all of it these!” the authors argue: one, by the way, a retired Episcopal priest, the other, a long time minister with the Quakers.

“We need to get back to the original Jesus,” they both insist, get back to the good man who said profound things and died a tragic death, who didn’t rise from the dead, who was not God incarnate, and who is not waiting for us in any kind of afterlife.

But it’s precisely this kind of flattening out of our understanding of Jesus that leads us to the cruel, child abusing god that so many think of when they think of Jesus dying for us.

Because if Jesus was simply a good man deeply connected to God, then yes, why on earth did he have to endure that tragic and grotesque suffering?

Why was he abandoned by God to such evil?

If he was simply a good man, none of his suffering makes any sense at all.

But on the other hand, if Jesus is, as our creed proclaims, “the only Son of God, begotten not made, true God from true God, through whom all things came into being...” then who ended up on the cross for our sakes on that grisly day – but God himself?

And while this is not Trinity Sunday – and while many clergy dislike preaching about the Trinity – and some folks in the pew dislike even more hearing about it, wrestling with this truth of our faith really is crucial if we are to understand our faith.

So when the Trinity is described as a three flavored ice cream cone (vanilla, chocolate and strawberry) or as a mango (peel, fruit and pit), while these may be helpful ways to **begin** thinking about this unknowable mystery, we really cannot stop with those analogies.

If we do, what we end up with is the chocolate god sending strawberry son to die for us, or the peel god sending the fruit son, making the chocolate and the peel look like creepazoids for doing something so cruel!

But God is God.

God cannot be divided.

So it is the same God who gives us life, who creates all that is, holding it together every moment of every day, **this same God who also comes to live among us**, to get to know us in our frailties and our foibles, and who, because a part of our human nature can't stand gentleness or kindness, because a part of us is in love with controlling people, places and things, God takes the enormous risk that we will reject him, which we do, landing God on the cross.

Meaning, it's not God who is cruel and abusive and perhaps even nuts — it's us.

Perhaps what God knows about us is that which generates cruelty and abuse and even nuttiness in us — is fear.

Fear, ultimately, of death.

But not only the death that comes when we have closed our eyes for the last time, but all the smaller deaths that invade every life.

Like my 5 year old granddaughter, mortified that she scored a soccer goal in the wrong teams net, like a teenager's first break up, like the death of a spouse, or the heartache of chronic illness.

Add to these our collective fears of each other, whether it's the Muslim ban, or separating children from their mothers at the border, it's fear that drives these efforts.

Fear of losing what we think we are entitled to.

It's not just today's world that is struggling with this.

After Pearl Harbor many of our Japanese neighbors were taken to internment camps for no better reason than they were of Japanese descent.

Recently, I was shocked to learn that after the 9/11 attacks, several Christian ministers were fired – for preaching reconciliation!

All of these fears grow out of our chronic fear of death.

But in God there is no death.

By becoming one of us, by becoming one **with** us, God at long last gives us this gift of no death.

By living among us, God, in Jesus, invites us into God's world, a world our first mother and father surrendered because they knew better than God, an affliction that still grips nearly all of us today.

In God's world, the seemingly first are last, while the seemingly last are first.

The great ones wash the feet of their enemies; and power is expressed though the weakness of unconditional love.

In joining with us, God in Jesus brings to us, as a Russian novelist once said: "the powerlessness of kindness, of **senseless** kindness, which is the secret of immortality.

Kindness can never be conquered.

The more stupid, the more wasted, the more helpless it may seem, the deeper and more penetrating is its reach.

Evil is impotent before it.

Kindness, the offspring of unfailing, unearned, love — is the only real power in all of creation." Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate*, paraphrased.

And perhaps the way we can live into that truth isn't by rejecting, but by sitting quietly **with**, the mysteries that are at the root of our faith.

Mysteries rooted in the kindness of our God — who sends not an emissary — but himself, to save us.

+amen.

