



April 10, 2022

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion

"Amen, I say to you this day you will be with me in Paradise." Luke 23:43



Dear Friends;

Why did Jesus have to die? The answer people generally give is *"Jesus died for our sins."* I find this to be an unsatisfactory response. This presents "God the Father" as afflicted with toxic masculinity, a tyrant, a sadistic rage-holic dad, or just an unreliable lover. This is called "penal substitution atonement theory."

This theory believes that Christ, by his own sacrificial choice was punished in our place to satisfy the "demands of justice" so then a petulant God could forgive us. The problem is this theory inoculates us from the demands of the Gospel. Rather than imitate Jesus, we merely leave it at "thanking" him. At its worst it leads us to see God as a cold, brutal figure, who demands acts of violence before God could love God's own creation.

This theology leads to a magical or transactional relationship with God. If I just have the correct belief or perform the right prayer or ritual, things will go well for me in the Divine courtroom. This thinking projects our own sense of a punishing justice upon God. But it is not God who is violent. We are. It is not God who demands suffering of humans. We do. God does not need or want suffering—neither in Jesus nor us.

The teaching of Jesus is a radical departure from a religion that demands retribution and punishment. Jesus presents the deepest meaning of the Jewish prophets. They had the insight that God punished Israel for their sins by loving them even more! (Ezekiel 16:53ff.) Jesus tells us in John's Gospel *"I did not come into the world to condemn the world, but to save it"* (12:47). Jesus never punishes anyone! Jesus did challenge people but for the sake of healing and insight. He wants to restore people to their divine origin of goodness. He tells us God only knows how to love us.

When we look at the gospels, we see that the only mission of Jesus is to heal people not condemn or punish them. Once we realize this, the idea of Jesus dying as punishment for our sins in in retribution to a harsh and violent God makes no sense.

Jesus dies on the cross because he chose to accept and embrace the imperfections and the injustices of the world. He chose to stand with the broken, outcast, and marginalized. Jesus was killed because he was caught by conflicting interests and half-truths. His ideas about *"those who lead should serve, the first should be last and the last should be first, forgiving one's enemies, and loving the least among us"* threatened the powers that be. They loved a brutal and punishing world view. Fear is the basis for empire.

The cross is the price Jesus paid for living in a mixed world that was both human and divine, good, and bad, utterly whole, and yet utterly disfigured. But the mind of God, revealed in Jesus, transforms all the suffering and brokenness of our human situation by standing in solidarity with us—from beginning to end. In the cross Jesus is with us. He does not hide from the dark side of reality. Rather he draws close to the pain of our world. He allows it to radically transform him. By embracing the world's imperfections with love, he changes the world from inside out. That transformation we call resurrection. Christians are invited, with Jesus, to be the visible sign of God's compassion. The cross and resurrection are the pattern of existence and our life of faith.

Peace,

Fr Ron

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