

Good Friday
March 30, 2018
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Isaiah 52:13-53:12/Psalm 22:1-20/Hebrews 10:16-25
John 18:1-19:42

“After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron Valley to a place.....” and then unfolds the story of his arrest, his sentence to death, his crucifixion, the piercing of his side, and then, according to John, his burial.

What were those words spoken by Jesus, according to John, just before our story today? They must have been important.

They are the closing words of a prayer Jesus makes for his disciples: “I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

I will return to those words in a moment.

But first, let me tell you about crucifixion. It was a Roman form of execution. It may not have originated with them but the Romans used this form of military and political punishment broadly and strategically. It was a public form of execution for traitors. Rabble-rousers. Violent criminals. Anyone who might challenge or jeopardize the authority of the state. It was designed to be a deterrent.

Jesus’s followers knew he was innocent of any of those charges. He was innocent. And without sin as the accounts say. Sin, “the seductive power of corruption.” That’s how many scholars define it today: Sin, the seductive power of corruption.

Jesus was without sin. He wasn’t about to take up arms against the state. But he refused to accept what Empire claimed as “normalcy.” The structuring of society in an inevitable hierarchy. Empire even suggested that such a social hierarchy mirrored the divine order itself. Jesus challenged that “normalcy” and refused to accept social hierarchy.

Because such a social hierarchy is constructed. By those in power. For those in power. So that everything and everyone knew their place. And stayed there.

Jesus did not see the world through the lenses of Empire. He saw the world very differently. And his followers were convinced that what Jesus saw was of God. It was what the kingdom of their day would be like if the vision that Jesus saw became theirs.

And Jesus was attracting crowds. There was something about him that transfixed his hearers. And transformed them. His teachings reached into you. His stories forced you to see from a different angle. They were disorienting. And mesmerizing. They made you think. And wonder. And question.

And his presence was healing. You knew you were somebody in the presence of Jesus. And even after he went from your sight you continued to feel differently about yourself. And about your neighbor. About the world. You saw differently. Jesus was a healer. He made all things new.

And Rome crucified him.

Which was the utmost humiliation. An unspeakable shaming. Perhaps an analogy would be lynchings in the south. A public hanging. From a tree. For all to see. Shaming. Nullifying. Dehumanizing.

The desired effect of crucifixion was to reduce the human being to nothingness. Nothingness. Liquidate them. The crucified one was condemned into oblivion. The crucified one was a god-forsaken nobody. Everyone knew it. Crucifixion intended to drive out the memory of that person. Because remembering was too horrible. Too traumatizing. Who would want to remember that horrible end. Who would consider talking about that person ever again. No one. That was the goal. The victim was silenced. And those associated with the victim fell to silence as well. A social silence. No stories about them would be told again. After all, the person had been eliminated. All memory of them was to be forsaken. End of story. End of stories.

But that was not the case with Jesus. It was not the end of the story of Jesus. His followers were not silent. They continued to tell stories. Stories about him. What it was like to be with him. Stories about seeing differently. Through the heart. Through the eyes of compassion. Through the love of God. His followers came to see what Jesus saw. Through their own eyes. And they couldn't stop talking about him.

Jesus was innocent. His death was unjust. It was catastrophic. Jesus's life meant something. He had lived for something. Something important. For truth. For a better world. He lived for us. He opened the way to possibilities. And hope. And his relationship with God seemed to quicken everyone else's. Jesus's life had meaning. And continued to live and develop in his followers.

But his death. His death. That was the horror. How to make sense of it?

So the early communities of Jesus began weaving stories. In itself a defiant act. They borrowed stories from the prophets and mystics, from heroes known and unknown. From those who had suffered an unjust death. They "historicized prophecy". They drew from the past in an effort to make sense of the present and even provide a sense of vindication. A salve for this tragic, tragic loss. His death would not be in vain. Jesus would not be forgotten. The early communities made sure of that.

Some sixty years after Jesus's crucifixion the author of John's gospel writes a detailed story about Jesus and his arrest and accusations and piercing and execution and burial. Burial. The bodies of the crucified were not given burials. They would often be left hanging or discarded for birds or wild dogs. The crucified were nobodies. Why would a nobody need a burial.

You can further imagine why you wouldn't want to speak of this....or about the person executed in this way....such images, such memory could drive you mad.

But the early communities resurrected story after story about Jesus. And developed a number of their own. Whatever attempts Empire's Machinery of Death made to eradicate Jesus failed. The ways of Empire

and its so-called “normalcy of civilization” were not inevitable. Jesus had said as much. And his followers were convinced that he was right.

Two thousand years since the crucifixion of Jesus his followers have yet to be silent. We are still talking about him. And his vision. There is another way to live in the world. Not violence. Not domination. Not either or. Not us and them. Not in or out. Not up and down. But us. Together. There is a way to live and be together. And that means we must love our enemy. Such a task to ask of anyone. But it is ours.

Jesus says: “I made your name known to them and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

That the love with which you have loved me may be in them.

It is. The love that Jesus knew is in us. That love never died. And never will.

Crucifixion failed to liquidate and obliterate Jesus. It failed to erase him from memory. It failed to silence his followers. There was something about him that proved to be stronger than death. Even death on a cross. And stronger than what some thought was the inevitability of Empire.