

A Good Friday Meditation

A few years ago a poster advertising Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion*, featured an image of Christ wearing a crown of thorns. The caption read:

Dying was his reason for living.

The movie itself was about his supposed last hours cobbled together from the various accounts in the gospels and other traditions. It was an incredibly violent and bloodthirsty film, typical of a Mel Gibson film. Why are we so obsessed with the death of Jesus?

Dying was his reason for living.

Really?

Much of Christian theology has been used to induce guilt and shame. You are so bad that Jesus had to die on the cross. The bloodier and more painful the death serves to demonstrate the depth of your depravity. You deserve all that beating. But Jesus took it for you. That is default Christianity. I call it spiritual abuse.

Jesus had a life before he died. The things he did and the things he said were provocative enough to put him on the wrong side of the authorities. From the things people remembered that he did and said, he was critical of the authorities. He was critical of the religious authorities and of the political authorities.

That is what got him killed.

He challenged systems of authority that took advantage of widows, of the poor, and of the outcast. He created a movement. And it was threatening enough that those in power felt the need to stop him. Perhaps to make of him an example.

That is what got him killed.

He was on the side of people who were oppressed by the economic policies of the temple. He was on the side of people considered unclean and sinners by the religious.

That is what got him killed.

He is remembered for telling parables and stories that upset people. He used a phrase "kingdom of God." That phrase means little to us because we have tamed it. Most folks thanks to the theologians think it is another phrase for heaven, a place the true believers go when they die.

It is likely that it was a political statement. It was a social statement. It was a statement of hope. As opposed to the kingdom of Caesar, imagine what the kingdom of God is like. It wasn't just a fantasy, a story. It was a movement. This is the kingdom to live for, to work for, perhaps even to die for. It is a kingdom of justice and compassion. In this kingdom, in this political economy the hungry are filled with good things. Now let's make it so. That was Jesus' message.

Jesus was about making changes in this world.

That is what got him killed.

He talked about compassion. He talked about moving beyond ethnic boundaries and divisions. He talked about forgiveness. Not something you go to the priest for or even to God for, but your neighbour. The neighbour is who we hurt, not God. The neighbour is the one from whom we need forgiveness. We get it as we give it.

Jesus worked to bring people together: Samaritan and Jew, Greek and Roman. He practised an open table, rich and poor, male and female. He challenged unjust boundaries and rules.

That is what got him killed.

Dying was not his reason for living.

Living was his reason for dying.

For life, he died. For integrity, he died. For compassion, he died. For justice, he died. For change, he died.

He was in the way. He was in the way of progress. He was in the way of Rome. He was in the way of the religious authorities who had sold out their people to Rome. He was killed as were many just like him.

Jesus didn't die of old age. He didn't die of cancer. He didn't get trampled accidentally by a runaway horse. Jesus was bullied to death. Not only Jesus, but thousands of people were tortured and executed methodically in a spectacle of brutality and control. Jesus was a victim of imperial terrorism.

There was and is nothing sacred and holy about the execution and torture of Jesus or of anyone. If anything, remembering the death of Jesus should summon us to honour life not death.

It should give us the courage and commitment to speak out and not remain silent in the face of torture, execution, violence, injustice, and needless suffering around the world.

The Easter acclamation, "Christ is Risen!" meant what? I think it meant that they, the people, those who told and wrote the stories about Jesus had had enough. They had had enough of Rome's bullying. They said,

"Every time we gather for a meal of bread and wine we will remember. We are Christ's body. Christ is alive with us. We will continue to remember and to resist. We will show hospitality to those who are victims of imperial bullying, to the outcast, to the slave, to the stranger. We will lean on and support each other. We will remember and tell the stories of the victims. And we will dream, hope, and work for the day in which the kingdom of God, the empire of God, the empire of justice and peace will be realized on Earth."

Obviously, Christianity evolved and moved in all kinds of directions and embraced many different mythologies and interpretations, and some of them quite good and helpful. But it is important not to lose sight of our roots. The earliest interpretation of the death and resurrection of Jesus is this:

In Christ, Empire's brutality is overcome by God's justice.

I wear this cross around my neck to remind me whose side I need to be on.

Jesus' life was fast. Like Martin Luther King, they both died before reaching forty. But their lives burned with passion and fire. They burned out for compassion and justice. Apparently, they believed that it is better to have burned out than never to have burned at all.

Whenever any of us stands up for those who are abused or put down or who suffer injustice from bullies big and small, we practice true religion. We live in the example and spirit of Jesus.

Only if Good Friday helps us to live a life that matters can we dare call it **Good Friday. Amen.**