

The King Who Reigns From a Tree

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

John 12:23-33, 19:16-30

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Good Friday

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I

The hour has come and the King mounts his throne. I do not mean Herod or Pilate. I mean Jesus. Jesus is convicted by Pilate, who finally caves in to the hate-filled cries of the crowd and sentences Jesus to be crucified. He carries his own cross, instrument of his own execution, out from Pilate's house, down through the Via Dolorosa to The Place of the Skull, Golgotha, outside the city gates, where piles of refuse from within the city slowly burn. It is a horrible place, a God-forsaken now strangely God-visited place. There they crucify him, alongside two criminals, one on his right, one on his left.

In John's Gospel, Jesus' crucifixion is also his enthronement. Time collapses in John, we do not have the same sort of chronological event following upon event in John as in the three Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. This hour of crucifixion is also the hour of enthronement, the hour of glorification. Remember he had said, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He had spoken to them of the necessity of this hour in terms of a grain of wheat falling into the ground.

"Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."ⁱ "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified."

From the moment on Thursday when Judas, "after receiving the piece of bread, immediately went out to betray him - it was night." It had been night from that moment forward, despite the fact that after the horrors of Jesus' betrayal and arrest and denial and trial, it had turned to morning. Still in every true sense it remained night, darkness at noon, on this blackest of all days that somehow, in totality, we look back on and call Good.

Freely, under no compelling from any human force whatsoever, but in order to fully complete the new covenant purposes of his Father with whom he is One, Jesus goes to his cross.

So many conflicting images swirl around us as we try to take it all in. The shame, the degradation, the humiliation, the lowest moment for human beings on the face of earth that this utterly good man becomes victim of this gross miscarriage of justice. We have seen it in our own times in Nazi camps, and American camps too, what outrageous sub-human acts people are still capable of perpetrating upon one another.

Yet, it is all part of a larger mysterious plan. It has not come to this strictly because of one man's betrayal, or one man's fearful political ruling, or one man's religious role as high priest. It has come through these real historical figures who each carry out their tragic roles, only because of God's will and purpose and design. What is happening at this Place of the Skull is something bigger. It is cosmic. The cosmic battle between good and evil, between God and the Devil.

The Book of Hebrews tells us,

“Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come...He entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption... For this reason he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant... He has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself.”ⁱⁱ

And yet - A King is crowned, as Jesus is lifted up on his cross. Pilate has been questioning him whether he is in fact, as they said, the King of the Jews. Jesus does not deny it, but rather says, “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.”ⁱⁱⁱ

II

So Pilate will make him a King, of sorts. Pilate has Jesus taken out and flogged by the soldiers. They weave a crown of long-gnarled thorns and crunch it on his head, piercing his skull. They throw a purple robe upon him and ridicule him. “Hail, King of the Jews!”^{iv}

When Pilate brings him back for further questioning Jesus refuses to answer him. Pilate says, “Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?” Now Jesus does answer, “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above.”^v

So when they nail Jesus to his cross, they place a sign, ordered by Pilate, onto the cross above his head that read, in the three most international languages of the day - Hebrew, and Latin and Greek, that all the world may know. “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” Jesus dies upon the cross, in agony and humiliation, yet, in glory and enthronement, as a King crowned upon his throne. A deep mysterious paradox.

Earlier he had said to Nicodemus, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” And so he is; lifted up on his Cross. And the reason? He had gone on to say to Nicodemus, “The son of Man (must) be lifted up... because God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

As Brennan Manning puts it,

“At the heart of the gospel of grace, the sky darkens, the wind howls, a young man walks up another Moriah in obedience to a God who demands everything and stops at nothing. This is the God of the gospel of Grace. A God who out of love for us, sent the only Son he ever had wrapped in our skin.”^{vi}

III

Last summer on sabbatical, Gayle and I worshipped one Sunday morning at an English-speaking Episcopal Church in Florence, Italy. Not certain of the service time we arrived an hour early and were invited to the fellowship hall for coffee, pastries and the adult forum class, being taught that day by a visiting PhD. student. His topic was a theory that has been going around proposing a bloodless atonement, a Christ who need not die in order to free us from sin. A wishy-washy redo of a limp old idea that Richard Niebuhr planned, saying, without sin into a kingdom without judgment through this ministrations of a Christ without a cross.

Basically this young scholar recounted thoughts along the lines that God loves us too much to require blood to be shed in order to free us of our sin. His line of argument was countering what is called the substitutionary-atonement theory of the crucifixion. The idea of the necessity of a vicarious death of one for another. That God’s wrath must be appeased by a death, once the death of sheep and goats, then finally the death of his own Son, in order for God’s divine wrath to be satisfied.

I found the PhD. student’s concept that day, well light. He virtually gutted the content of the cross and the heart of Christianity.

However, there is an important reason the Church has not, from its earliest days, defined any one and only interpretation of what happens in the crucifixion, as THE proper interpretation. There is an important reason why the various theories of the atonement: that substitutionary atonement theory, also the moral example model of love theory – that Jesus suffered as an example of love for us, also the Christus Victor theory, that Jesus suffered as a conquering king who liberates in his death those in places of torment, a theory by the way which is most closely aligned with John’s approach in his gospel. But all these theories remain theories, just that, approaches to the mystery. We have no one single dogma of atonement because, you see, the Cross is too immense for that, too large to be reduced to any one theory.

This we have, but this we believe - Jesus comes to die. There is no escaping death for him. Out of that death he bears the sin of the whole world. But Jesus does not die because of an angry God who is incapable of forgiveness any other way, nor a vindictive God who demands his pound of flesh, though God has a wathful side. Jesus dies because of a passionate loving God who, he showed us is our Father – who loves us this much, who will go this far for us. A God who, though Jesus has feelings of

abandonment as he hangs there, is yet always present and weeping with him and with us the whole way along. Jesus dies on the Cross – a scandal to Jews. Folly to Greeks. But to we who believe as Christ the Power of God, and Christ the Wisdom of God.

William Wilimon, Methodist Bishop in Alabama, told about giving lectures at a seminary in Sweden a few years ago, where a seminarian asked, “Do you really think Jesus Christ is the only way for us to get to God?” Wilimon answered.

“I’ll just say this, if you were born in South Carolina and living in a terribly violent culture, yes. There really is no way for somebody like me to get to God, other than a Savior who doesn’t mind a little blood and gore, a bit of suffering and grizzly shock and awe, in order to get to me. A nice, balanced Savior couldn’t do much for a guy like me. I need a fanatic like Jesus. For we have demonstrated that we are an awfully, fanatically cruel and bloody people when our security is threatened. We have this history of murdering our saviors. So I just cannot imagine any other way to God except Jesus.”^{vii}

IV

Look what happens from that cross throne, as John records the story. As the universal king of the Jews and the Greeks and the Romans and you and me is crowned as Jesus is lifted up, amid his shame and suffering, three words. The first word concerns his mother and the disciple he loved, John, about this disciple caring for her. “Woman, here is your son.” And to the disciple, “Here is your mother.”

Then, a second word as the torture works its grizzly way upon his naked body, he cries out, “I thirst.” He who is Lord of heaven and earth now is experiencing thirst of the most complete sort. He who had quenched the thirst of so many and promised, as the thirst-quencher, “Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty”, now himself is feeling completely the pangs of the desert. Thirst for water. Thirst for human contact from which he is being separated. Thirst for his Father whose presence he cannot now feel.

As the mocking soldiers offer him a sponge soaked in vinegar, he utters his third, and in John’s account, his final word, “It is finished.” What is finished? His life on earth is finished. “He bowed his head and gave up his spirit.” His thirst is finished. His suffering is finished. His atoning work is finished. His battle is finished. God’s love is complete.

One of the traditional crosses we see portrayed in art is a cross topped with a crown. That is, I think, what John gives us in his account of Good Friday. Here is Jesus, the King, glorified in his death, returning to his Father. The hymn writer puts it so well,

“Crown Him with many crowns, The Lamb upon His throne;
Hark how the heavenly anthem drowns all music but its own:
Awake, my soul, and sing Of Him, who died for thee,
And hail Him as thy matchless King Through all eternity.

Crown Him the Lord of love; behold His hands and side,
Rich wounds, yet visible above, in beauty glorified:
No angel in the sky can fully bear that sight,
But downward bends His burning eye at mysteries so bright.”^{viii}

The angels cannot bear the sight. Much less you and me. Yet on this day when the sky turns black and the world does the worst of which it is capable, Jesus nevertheless loves till the end. The King who reigns from a Tree.

ⁱ John 12:23-24.

ⁱⁱ Hebrews 9:11-28 selected.

ⁱⁱⁱ John 18:37.

^{iv} John 19:1-3

^v John 19:12.

^{vi} Brennan Manning, The Ragamuffin Gospel, p.38

^{vii} William Willimon, “Pulpit Resource,” vol. 38, No. 2, April, May, June 2010.p.8.

^{viii} “Crown Him with Many Crowns”, The Hymn Book, p.213.