

Passion Sunday (Palm Sunday)

In the third verse of the rousing hymn, *How Great Thou Art* we sing,

“And when I think that God his Son not sparing
sent him to die I scarce can take it in.
That on the cross my burden gladly bearing,
he bled and died to take away my sin.”

This verse enshrines a long-held tradition that Jesus died as a necessary atonement to God for our sins. From this perspective Jesus' suffering and death was the price of the ransom paid to evil so that we might share in God's life. Alternatively, the death of Jesus is seen as the only thing that satisfied God's anger at our sins, and caused God to love us again.

Today, we rightly hear a lot about victims—people, who through no choice or fault of their own, have been dealt with wrongly by others who are free to act otherwise and who know better. In some of the ways we think about the passion, Jesus becomes God's victim. Through no fault of his own, and seemingly powerless in the face of his Father's will, Jesus becomes a victim of God's need for a sacrifice, a ransom or atonement.

As a result, many of us can feel that sometimes we are God's victims too, because if God wanted Jesus to suffer and die, why should we be surprised or complain when we receive large crosses to carry as well?

Mark's account of the passion tends to reinforce Jesus as victim. Mark has Jesus eating with the outcasts, his friends betraying, denying or deserting him. He tells us that Jesus is terrified at the prospect of death and calls on his “Abba” or “daddy” to help him out. In the end he accepts “the will of God” but even then feels abandoned by God on the Cross.

I often think we misread what Jesus is referring to when he accepts God's will in the Garden. Rather than refer to the particular will of the Father to see Jesus suffer and die on Good Friday, I think it's more helpful and consoling to understand it as referring to God's will that Jesus remains faithful to the way he lived. If by doing that Jesus threatened the religious and political authorities of his day so much that they have to murder him, then his death is the ultimate sacrifice which reveals how far God was prepared to go in love for us. This reveals to us that Jesus came “to live,” and that by faithfully living this life he was put to death by the powers of sin. Through the cross we see the price to be paid in confronting sin in our day and obediently living out the demands of God's kingdom of justice and peace.

This Holy Week let's celebrate that God spared nothing in showing us how to live. As we commemorate Jesus' life, death, and resurrection may we move from being victims of a bloodthirsty God to choosing again to follow Jesus' example and live lives which are faithful, loving, and obedient. May we also appreciate that this life continues to, literally, threaten “the hell out of” those opposed to the reign of God in our world, but that as Jesus was faithful to God and God to Jesus, so they will remain faithful to us as well, no matter what.

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