



“Sacrificed, Forsaken, Beloved, Conquering?”

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Scripture (NRSV):

Mark 15:20-39

²⁰ After mocking Jesus, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

²¹ They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. ²² Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). ²³ And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. ²⁴ And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

²⁵ It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. ²⁶ The inscription of the charge against him read, “The King of the Jews.” ²⁷ And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. ²⁹ Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, “Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, ³⁰ save yourself, and come down from the cross!” ³¹ In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. ³² Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.” Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

³³ When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ³⁴ At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” ³⁵ When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, “Listen, he is calling for Elijah.” ³⁶ And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.”

³⁷ Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. ³⁸ And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. ³⁹ Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was a son of God!"^l

Sermon:

What is happening when Jesus is betrayed, condemned, whipped, stripped and hammered onto a cross to die a tortured death?

Is this the conquest of human depravity, of the terrible taste we have for violence? Is this the story that reveals our inner darkness as human beings?

Yes, it actually is a story, a telling of the tale, that reveals the shallowness of human justice, virtue and dignity, and splits wide open the hidden depths of our inner darkness.

And when this happens to the God bringer, the Truth teller, the Miracle worker, the Healer and Feeder and Restorer of human relationship...then it seems as if all we can do is despair.

Certainly it is what the disciples did. They ran, they hid, they denied knowing Jesus, and they despaired.

But the church of Jesus Christ did not stay in that black despair.

Instead, over the thousands of years of seeking to know and follow Jesus to the knowledge of God, to the love of God, we have taken that terrible cross, and found power and meaning, even in the darkness of his death.

The ancient world, and the world of Temple Judaism, in which Jesus lived and died, was a world of animal sacrifice. We do not understand that any more...there is no theology of offering an animal to be killed and eaten as a way of being forgiven of our wrongs. But it was a part of the ancient world, and in looking at Jesus, son of God and innocent person, who died at the hands of his enemies...the earliest Christians saw someone who willingly gave his life for others, who sacrificed himself for us. This kind of sacrifice we do

understand. We see it in the teacher who stands in front of the shooter to save their students. We see it in the firefighter who loses their life to save another.

1. Jesus was, the ancient church said, that sacrifice.

Jesus was also seen as the “scapegoat”...the animal loaded with the sins of the people and then driven out into the wilderness, taking all that burden of sin with him, and dying alone, **carrying the burden of our human sin away so that humankind could approach God, clean and pure of sin at last.** Jesus was the lamb that was slain, a sacrifice to God. He willingly carried our sins onto the cross and restored us to relationship with our God, from whom we were alienated, by our many sins. Jesus as sacrifice made us able to face God. This made sense to the early Christians. It is in our scripture and our hymns down through the ages. But it may seem strange and foreign to us now.

2. By the medieval period, Jesus’s hanging on the cross was seen in another way: at that time a familiar understanding was that Jesus was the one who had to face the affronted dignity of God. God was mighty Lord, absolute ruler, righteous and due all honor, just like a feudal King. And any sin was an offense against that all mighty and righteous Lord. But the sins of humanity are innumerable and who could possibly provide satisfaction to the injured honor of God? No human being could. So God sent his Son Jesus and made him pay the price by his death so that the honor of God could be satisfied.

If this particular theory makes your stomach turn, welcome to the club! It makes my very soul hurt. God is without mercy. God is without saving grace. God insists that God’s own child must die. In this theory of atonement, God is a distant, cold and proud monarch and so removed, that love and mercy for lost humanity are completely absent. Even love and mercy for the Son are absent, rather, the Son of God, in blind subservience, walks to his death in servile obedience. As I said, this is a very medieval theory and yet it haunts us to this day. For many an “ex-Christian” this theory of an angry, vengeful, God is what drove them away from the church. This is why I cannot sing the song, *In Christ Alone*, without changing these words: “and on that cross, as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied”...for me these must be changed or I will shut my mouth and never sing it at all.

3. But the church and Christians around the world and through history do not have to accept this “satisfaction” theory of atonement. It is also possible to look at the suffering Son of God on the cross and realize that there is great, deep, profound love at work. For

Jesus knew, as every human does, that we are trapped, **desperately trapped in our sin of violence**, in our basest emotions of hate and vengeance, cruelty, envy, fear and we cannot find God, love God, know communion with God when we are trapped in these bitter states of being, this bitter cycle of violence that darkens our world across time and space.

So Jesus offers us the only solution that will show us God, and God's design for all creation. It is the solution of love without violence. Justice held with mercy. Community and inclusion. Safety, healing, a world without war or human cruelty. A world rich in love and life, and hope and healing. And if the price of showing such a world included never raising his hands in violence, then that is the price Christ would pay.

That price, of nonviolent love, is why Jesus' disciples are told to put away their swords when the soldiers come. That price, of showing the kingdom of God as a kingdom of peace and a world without violence, means that Jesus speaks to Pilate in the gospel of John and says, "my kingdom is not of this world".

Because this world is drenched in blood and violence, and Jesus will not...ever....participate in it. So, as his final act of defiance to this wicked world, and as a final act to show us all what God is and what God wants for all creation, Jesus allows himself to be crucified, rather than to give in to violence. And his final words, from the gospel of Luke, are "Father forgive them", rather than rise up in violence. So, yes, I can sing the song when the words are changed: "and on that cross, as Jesus died, the love of God was recognized."

But does it end thus? A good man, a holy man, even, the Son of God, dies as a witness to God's love and then that is it...?

No, there is more.

4. For we also believe that the death Jesus died, as God, not merely as man, means that the very power of God, Creator and Maker of all things, faces the greatest, the cosmic enemy of the creatures God has made and loves. In the death, and in the resurrection of Jesus, we discover that **God in Jesus conquers death itself**, at last. The great victory of the Son of God, is in the conquest of death. The church jubilantly declares the ancient statement of faith, "Dying he conquered death, rising he rose to eternal life."

And so, against every fear, and every broken hearted tear, we have the promise of Jesus Christ in his dying on the cross: he vanquishes death, he is the conqueror of our greatest

enemy, that which we fear above all things. The one that causes us unending grief through its endless, countless manifestations of age, disease, war, cruelty, fatal violence of every kind...death.

Death is slain.

And as the ancients sang in song about Jesus on Easter morning; he even went into the land of the dead and opened the gates of eternal life to all that were dead!

The victory of our Christ is complete, mighty and joyous in its liberation.

Are we done exploring the mystery of God's love, and God's great design for all things?
Made known to us, in Jesus our Christ?

No, assuredly not.

We celebrate a living faith, a living Christ.

We live in an evolving universe.

Surely faith can evolve, and the wonder of knowing God can evolve with us.

It is cause for rejoicing..

Let us lift our palms today, and sing our hymns of praise, to Christ; liberator, lover, sacrifice, mystery, wonder and life eternal with God.

Amen.