

## The whole cohort

John Dear | Apr. 4, 2007 On the Road to Peace

*Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus inside the praetorium and gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped off his clothes and threw a scarlet military cloak about him. Weaving a crown out of thorns, they placed it on his head, and a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They spat upon him and took the reed and kept striking him on the head. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the cloak, dressed him in his own clothes, and led him off to crucify him.*

-- Matthew 27: 27-31

I was on retreat 10 years ago, during my Jesuit tertianship year in Belfast, pondering the Holy Week readings, when I came upon this text, Jesus being hauled before "the whole cohort." The whole cohort? What was that? I wondered. I looked it up and blanched at the answer.

In Jerusalem, each year during the Passover festival, the Roman governor assembled a cohort, some 600 soldiers to protect against riot or rebellion. Most years calm prevailed, and the idle cohort had nothing to do. And so they drank themselves into a rage and spent their days seizing upon petty criminals and rebels and torturing and crucifying them.

One of the most appalling and astounding images in the scripture -- the most anti-military image ever pictured. Here is the most powerful military unit in the world, and they humiliate Jesus, passing the time by mocking and torturing God in the City of David.

The image offers a summary of things. It brings before our eyes the military might of the world mocking and laughing at the God of peace, hating Jesus, humiliating him, and torturing him because he claims to be a king, to be God. They know no god but Caesar, and this doomed man in their clutches insists upon a God of peace. He's the biggest fool they've ever encountered. His self-image is preposterous, hilarious. They think scourging and nails will set him straight out.

If we're unconvinced that God does not condone war, that God is not warlike, then we should spend more time standing with the mocked Jesus as he suffers the jeers and humiliations of 600 soldiers before they kill him.

Contemplate the scene and realize our own explicit and implicit support of armed power over the God of Peace. Then we would quit the military, refuse to serve as chaplains, and non-cooperate with any military. Because we stand with the unarmed Jesus, we would oppose the draft, withdraw support from our military, withhold war

taxes, and disobey orders to kill.

We would be transformed into anti-military people. We'd speak out against all wars and institutions of violence. We'd allow ourselves to be humiliated, persecuted, arrested and tried. As we boldly announce a nonviolent world, we'd gladly submit to the mockery of military authorities.

Remember the student standing before Chinese tanks in Tiananmen Square? There's an analogy of Jesus before the whole cohort.

This week, with the world brimming with wars, as the president plows ahead in the senseless massacre of innocent Iraqis, as Los Alamos churns out the latest in nuclear weapons, we recall the innocent, unarmed, nonviolent Jesus standing before 600 jeering, laughing, murderous Roman soldiers.

Jesus spent his days teaching and practicing nonviolence, denounced violence, healed the sick. He created a community of love and resisted the institutionalized violence of the Roman empire. He turned over the moneychangers' tables in the Temple in an act of peaceful civil disobedience, and faced the inevitable consequence of arrest, jail, trials, torture and execution. He did it without violent anger. He did it while maintaining his relationship with his loving God. He did it to show us how to live and die, not how to kill.

The stories of Holy Week are no exercise in piety. They summon us to bear hope, today, here and now. We are summoned to renounce our government's massacre of Iraqi sisters and brothers. We are challenged to share the humiliation of Jesus, as we suffer the mockery of our patriotic fellow citizens, and the abuse of officials who arrest and try us.

With the hidden God of nonviolence, we can stand tall before the cohort, undergo derision and abuse, and stand for peace. As we do, we can trust with Jesus that the victory, the outcome of disarmament, justice, and humanity's conversion to peace, is assured.

John Dear's latest book, "Transfiguration" (from Doubleday, with a foreword by Archbishop Tutu) is available from local bookstores and Amazon.com. Dear is to stand trial in Albuquerque, N.M., April 12 for a recent protest against the Iraq war. He will also offer a week of classes on the Gospels, the life of Jesus, and the work of peace and justice, at the historic Ghost Ranch conference center in Abiquiu, N.M. (where artist Georgia O'Keefe lived) from June 17-24. For information contact, [www.ghostranch.org](http://www.ghostranch.org) [1] and [www.johndear.org](http://www.johndear.org) [2].

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