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Crucifixion helps make meaning of pain in church, world

Jamie Manson | Apr. 20, 2011 Grace on the Margins

I?ve had more than one Catholic who grew up either before or on the cusp of Vatican II tell me horror stories of how they were taught that Jesus died *because* of their sins.

This was a particularly heavy-handed way for priests and nuns to lay an even thicker coat of guilt on impressionable Catholic school children. Because they were sinners, Jesus had to suffer and die to redeem them. It was one rendering of the traditional theological interpretations of the crucifixion -- that Jesus *had* to die to fulfill the Scriptures and that his death atoned for the sins of the world.

I know that countless people throughout the centuries have found profound, life-changing and even comforting meaning in this understanding of the Cross. But I?ve often felt that if we immerse ourselves in the accounts of Jesus? arrest, passion, and death as told by the four Gospels, these texts can broaden and deepen our understanding of the crucifixion. It can help us make meaning of so much of the anguish that we witness in our world and in our church.

When I read the passion narratives of the Gospels, I don?t hear simply that Jesus suffered and died for our sins. Rather, I hear the four evangelists very clearly say that Jesus? suffering and death was the will of those who conspired against him -- those whose political systems he had undermined, those whose religious convictions he had offended.

Jesus? passion and death is a result of deeply-human intolerance, jealousy, resentment, hatred, and, most of all, fear.

Jesus? death may have been the will of God, but it was also the will of both powerful people and ordinary people who preferred unquestioning loyalty to rigid, oppressive political and religious regimes to the profound challenges of God incarnate.

That is, after all, who Jesus is -- the betrayed, suffering incarnation of God.

Jesus was the embodiment of all those things we *should* equate with God: love and justice, care and compassion, creation and creativity, transformation and wholeness.

Jesus was the embodiment of all good and healing things that we experience in this life on this earth, and Jesus taught us the ways to experience this fullness God?s presence more and more abundantly: by healing afflictions, by offering community to those banished by religions and societies, by inviting us to his table when no one else seemed to know we existed.

Unfortunately, Jesus? convictions about the ways to bring God?s presence more fully into the world shattered traditional religious practices and cultural conventions.

Though some thought having the fullness of life meant having socio-economic power, Jesus -- God-incarnate --

said it meant sitting at the table with the dregs of society. Though some thought experiencing holiness meant being acceptable in the eyes of religious authorities, Jesus said it meant being constantly judged and ostracized by those in religious power. Though many were told that experiencing God meant obeying laws and practicing empty rituals, Jesus told them that encountering God happens when we feed those who hunger, welcome the estranged, shelter the vulnerable, and visit the lonely.

Because that is who God is: love, justice, integrity, comfort, peace. Any time we experience these things, we experience God. And, therefore, any time these God-experiences are violated or snuffed out, we experience a death of God -- a microcosmic manifestation of the crucifixion in our time.

The crucifixion tells on a grand scale the smaller-scale deaths of God that occur every minute of every day throughout the world. In the Gospel stories, God, in the person of Jesus, is being wounded, abused, neglected, and killed. And this idea, I believe, couldn?t be more relevant and more meaningful to us today in a world ruptured by violence, poverty, and greed, and in a church beleaguered by self-alienation, intolerance, and excommunications.

In Matthew 25, Jesus tells us that when we fail to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, visit the sick or the imprisoned, we fail to do these things to God.

It follows, then, that whenever God?s creation -- whether it be human lives or the ecosystems of the earth -- is unjustly harmed, God is harmed.

Whenever we harm ourselves or deny our own goodness, we wound God. Whenever we allow religious institutions to rob us of our dignity as unconditionally beloved children of God, God is put into a prison and degraded. Whenever we deny love or compassion to someone in need, or allow injustice to prosper, we deny God.

Whenever a creation of God suffers at the hands of greed, or the abuse of power, or hatred or fear, God is abused. Whenever a creation is killed, whether through our continued ravaging of the earth or through atrocities like genocide and war, God is crucified.

For a brief time, God had a body on this earth in the person of Jesus. But that doesn?t mean that God?s body does not continue to work on this earth, seeking and yearning to bring God?s presence -- love, justice, and compassion -- more fully alive in all of creation in order to stop the crucifixions, the on-going and never-ending deaths of God.

That is what Jesus tried to do. This is our truest calling.

Centuries ago, St. Teresa of Avila, the great teacher and great reformer of the Church, was ecstatically aware of God?s presence all around us. She wrote a poem, in which she explained that though Christ had no physical body on earth now, Christ does still have ours bodies to work with. She writes:

> Christ has no body now on earth but yours
> No hands, no feet on earth but yours
> Yours are the eyes through which Christ looks with
> compassion on this world
> Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

Holy Week helps us become more aware of the many on-going crucifixions in our own bodies, in our communities, in our church, and in our world.

And it reminds us that while our bodies are on earth, we are called to bring more abundant life, whether in the form of healing, community-building, or justice-seeking, to the places in our world, our church, and ourselves -- wherever we see the Light and Life of God at risk of dying.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

Editor's Note: We can send you an e-mail alert every time Jamie Manson?s column, "Grace on the Margins", is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: **E-mail alert sign-up** [1]. If you already receive e-mail alerts from us, click on the "update my profile" button to add "Grace on the Margins" to your list.

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