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Good Friday!

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 22, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

The problem with knowing the end of the story in advance is that it is too easy to critique the actions of the participants who did not know how the story would end. And, for a story that his been around a long time, different parts of the story become linked with elements in the ambient culture. And, finally, if these barriers keep us from inserting ourselves into the story, we can appreciate the narrative, but we can?t really make it our own, the story can?t become decisive for us, only for the protagonists. All three of these issues warrant attention as we consider Good Friday.

Because we know how the story ends, we see those who helped Jesus ? Simon, Veronica, the women who kept watch ? as the good guys and the rest as scoundrels. Certainly, we see the high priests who sought false witness against Jesus, as culprits, as well as the rest of the Jewish people. Over the centuries, the story has been used to justify anti-Semitism. This can be seen not only in the perseverance of the blood libel but also in the exoneration of Pilate. After all, Jesus was crucified under Roman law. Pilate could have said ?No.? But, later generations of Christians preferred to blame the Jews than the Romans and so now the phrase, ?to wash one?s hands? of a situation expresses more of a sense of frustration than it does the abdication of moral responsibility.

One of the reasons that it has been easy for Christians to blame the Jews for the death of Christ is that we see the charges brought against him as false. We know that Jesus was without sin and so he was innocent. But, of course, he was not innocent of the charges brought against him. In the terms of their religion, Jesus really was a blasphemer and an imposter. He had claimed the power to forgive sins, a power that was reserved to God alone. Jesus had broken the Sabbath which was no man-made law but had been given to Moses at Sinai and was part of the social fabric?s very foundation. He had claimed, or allowed others to claim, that he was the Son of God, the Messiah, the Christ, but the Christ was supposed to deliver Israel from the Romans and this man now stood in chains in the praetorium.

This is key: The charges brought against Jesus were, in the understanding of the day, true. And on this day, the trial and crucifixion would prove that those charges were true. When we read that people shouted ?Let him save himself,? that is not only a mere taunt from the crowd but an affirmation that the verdict against him was the correct one. This man had claimed a special closeness with almighty God: Surely God would defend his own and not let him be put to shame! Surely, this horrible death could not come to God?s chosen so he must have been an imposter. The verdict of the world against Jesus was the correct one ? unless you know what we know, unless you know how the story ends. But, we cannot let our imaginations run there yet. We must first dwell upon this idea that Jesus had it coming. He had challenged the temple worship, he had challenged the religious authorities and, most especially, he had challenged the Law itself and now the Law vindicated itself by condemning him. The Law, the basis of Jewish society, given by the hand of God himself to Moses, that Law had won and Jesus had lost. His crucifixion exposes him to be a false prophet.

So, let us not read about the Romans and the Jews and think they were scoundrels. Truly, as Jesus himself said, ?they know not what they are doing.? They did not see with the eyes of Easter faith, but unlike us, they had not witnessed the resurrection. What is our excuse when we, too, know not what we are doing?

The verdict against Jesus on the first Good Friday was not rendered only by the Sanhedrin. It was not confirmed only by Pilate. This verdict was the verdict of the world: The world could not contain the Son of God, it could not fit him into our neat little categories, our expectations for God?s involvement with us, so the world killed him. The verdict would have been the same had it happened in fourth century Asia Minor or seventh century Gaul or 21st century America. Just as there was no room at the inn at the time of his birth, there is no room for this scandalous prophet in any age: He dines with sinners and tax collectors. He proclaims mercy to the unjust. His whole life is a scandal. We speak about the ?scandal of the Cross? but, to the people of his time, the scandal was not the Cross but Jesus? life. The Cross was the verdict on that scandalous life.

Today, the task of the Christian is not just to read the narrative of the passion and death of Jesus, but to expropriate it for ourselves. If we hope to experience the joy of Easter, we must first appreciate the horror of today, and that horror is not somebody else?s horror, it does not just belong to the first century Jews and Romans. Be honest: if someone came into your life and said ?You have it all wrong!? you would strike back. If someone said your ideas about God were crimped and myopic, you would strike back. If someone came and said that he was forgiving the sins of horrible people, you would strike back. Do not, today, fancy yourself as Simon the Cyrene or one of the women who stayed with Jesus and, unlike the apostles, did not flee. Imagine yourself among the crowd shouting ?Crucify Him!? Imagine yourself among the centurions whipping his back or nailing him to the tree. Imagine yourself with a lance, piercing his side: That lance is already in your hand, it is pride, and if you think you are free from it, you are the most deceived person in the world.

Jesus had it coming. Today, the world made its decision regarding Jesus. It rendered its verdict. He deserves to die. *O vos omnes*. All you who walk this way, look and see. Look closely, you can see yourself in this story. You are standing with the crowd and shouting ?Crucify Him!?

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