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Holy Capital Punishment

Ken Briggs | Apr. 19, 2014 NCR Today

Jesus took a tumble across the street again this year. It happened in the midst of the annual "Way of the Cross" procession in which parishioners as Roman soldiers escort Jesus, falling from the weight of his pine board cross, to the church.

Dozens of school children looked on, dazzled by the red and gold costumes and Star Wars helmets of the players, and fixed at the moment the young Jesus collapsed and a friend took the wooden burden from him. The children cheered the festivity and gasped at the fall.

This is as publicly graphic as the Christian story will get for them and their elders. It highlights the most real day of the Christian year. Miracles and resurrection may stir confusion and doubt, but crucifixion is irreducible, similar only to the Palm Sunday entrance in its ability to relate to everyday experience.

But the procession also raises its own question that I suspect few of the children -- let alone the grownups -- have explored: why did they nail Jesus to the cross?

Most of us have accepted packaged answers. It was God's plan and had to go that way to obtain the triumphal ending. It was Jewish refusal to accept the Messiah. The Romans saw this remarkable prophet as a political threat.

Based on everything we know, we say "well of course he was innocent" and we would never have accepted the verdict. We reject Roman judgment on grounds it is "unChristian." But, of course, we have established our own standards for doing the same thing on our own grounds as a chorus of voices protest, sometimes with the help of DNA test, that we also kill the innocent.

If most of those children pick up one or the other or even a blend of those reasons the way their parents did, then it will do little more than serve the purpose of Jesus' dying as prelude to the capstone of the Christian year, Jesus' rising from that death.

Without diminishing the centrality of Easter, I think the cause of the Good Friday events deserve attention. After all, the motives attributed to those who sentenced Jesus to death have fostered vile bias against Jews and warped readings of history that have had lasting effect. The dynamics of capital punishment follow us to this day as we create reasons for justifying its practice. While it's reasonable to assume that Christians condemn it's execution in the case of Jesus, a close look at the circumstances at that time disclose a similar pattern of concocting evidence and conflicting special interests. Though we moderns don't for a moment believe Jesus deserved such a fate, polls show that more than a majority of us, perhaps even those looking on at the Good Friday procession, that it's acceptable to kill someone who breaks certain of our laws. Difference in legal criteria, but not in kind.

What will the children take away from the procession? That Jesus was supremely ill-treated but that the crimes of death row candidates in a prison two blocks away in prison can rightly put them to death? Given constraints on time and the worries of the day, it's unlikely that the public display of the most tragic day of the Christian

year will lead to a closer look at Jesus' execution as a way of assessing our own beliefs. But the material for doing so is out there on that day.

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