

Friday, March 29, 2013

Good Friday: Theology of the Cross

Today's Gospel is striking. In what at time seems like a tragic drama, that step-by-step shatters our illusions of power, truth, and even goodness.

It begins by showing the impotence of the bluntest of power, sheer physical and violent power. An entire detachment of soldiers is sent out along with the police all armed to the teeth to arrest this religious teacher. All Jesus says, is I am he, and the whole lot of them fall to the ground in fear. So much for the power of the swords. It isn't just these soldiers' swords that are mocked. Peter, I am sure certain that the time has finally come to defend Jesus and defeat these oppressive soldier, uses this moment to draw his own sword. And despite his bluster, all he manages to accomplish is to cut off the ear of the high priest's slave, he can't even strike a soldier, let alone anyone who held real power. So much for the effectiveness of the sword of the righteous; so much for our own illusions of the power of blunt violence.

Jesus is arrested, and taken to the high priest. Once again we have Peter, Peter who more than any of the other disciples embodied the systems of honor and loyalty so central to ancient culture. Then push comes to shove, and it is Peter who quickly denies that he even knew Jesus. Peter is also more than this. After all Peter is the "rock" on which the church is built, this is our firm foundation, Peter, who when asked if he is one of the disciples of Jesus, responds by denying it three times. Unfortunately this story is preserved, this story about the foundation of the church, not so that we can

just think about how much we have improved, but rather so that we can see clearly the tendencies of even the most religious.

If you have any question about how this story shatters any illusion of Religion's rightness, one only has to look at who has arrested and tried Jesus, the highest representative, of Jesus' own religion. As Jesus is struck by the police, in that action it is made clear, that their knowledge of God, is based only on their own claim to authority, and not on any actual knowledge of God. Even the authority that they do have is mocked. They did after all have the authority to execute a person for violating the religious law, but they are cowards, preferring Pilate to do the dirty work. So much for the righteousness or truth of religions.

Then there is Pilate. Pilate, who by all secular measures was by far the most powerful person around. He was the local embodiment of the power of the empire. He was famous for his brutality. Ironically it is Pilate who begins to figure out who Jesus is, so Pilate, the all-powerful Pilate, tries to get out of what he is being pushed to do. And in this, his great power is also revealed to be a sham. He has trapped himself in his own position of power. He is trapped by the mob, he is trapped by not being able to have people even suggest that his is not a friend of the emperor. Pilate, with all his power, is little more than a puppet, who attempts to even wash his hands of the deed his commands.

Finally there is death itself. What is more powerful, what is more final than death? And yet in reaching out for Jesus, in claiming the Son of God, in the death of the one who was truly innocent any claim to death's righteousness, death's justice, is simply destroyed. "It is finished" Jesus says, and with these words Violence, Loyalty, honor, religion, political power

even death all of this, all of these human ways of seeking power and glory, all of them are shown to be our lie.

Something else is also going on. Step by step, as Jesus moves closer to the cross, John makes it clear that it is in fact Jesus, it is in fact God who is in control. It is Jesus who not only knocks the soldiers back, but allows his arrest, who had taught in public, who gave Pilate his power, who even chose when to give up his Spirit. Step by step, John makes it clear in whom true power is present, it is in God and God alone.

What is amazing is how God uses this power. God uses God's power, so that Jesus is betrayed, and arrested. God's power knows of Peter's denial before he even denies Jesus, and yet God keeps him close as a disciple and as the foundation of the church. Through God's power Jesus is abandoned, God's power leads Jesus to be falsely accused, tortured and condemned. By God's power God is humiliated and murdered and most painfully of them all, it is by God's power that God's Son, that God's only and beloved Son is murdered and dies. It is by God's supreme and ultimate power that brings us to this point, where God is dead. God uses God's power, a power so great that it knit the universe together, so that God might live though the worst that humans can experience, that God might suffer the worst that Sin can inflict. God uses God's power, so that God might be fully and completely present at the very point at which we are at our lowest. God is simply with us.

Theological this is what we call the Theology of the Cross. It is theology before the foot of the cross. From this point it is clear that all of our own attempts at glory, at truth or even goodness are before God simply false. Even our attempts at being religious, are on their own one more thing that

crucifies God. At the same time, from the cross what we see is simply that God is with us, God is with all who suffer, all who are abandoned or betrayed, all who are humiliated or tortured, all who are condemned and murdered, God is with all who have lost children to death. The cross turns our gaze from staring up into the clouds, to the hard work of looking down, into our lives and seeking that God is with us. From the cross, all of our own claims to glory may be crucified, but the gift is that the cross makes clear, that God is with, us, in all that life brings and suffers, and it is the cross that proclaims that God is particularly revealed amongst those that this world crucifies.

And in this act, all of this is brought into God, all of our sin and all of our suffering; all of our self-righteousness and all of our humiliation;, all of our life, and all of our dying. All of this is brought into God's story, into God's being; nothing is now separate from God. "It is finished" but God is also dead. There is God, we have crucified him, there is God, who is now the crucified, there is God and he is dead. All is silent and we wait and we watch for what God will now do.