

Crucifixus Etiam pro Nobis

1 Corinthians 1:17-24

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Every year in my congregation, we have an annual Good Friday worship service that lasts from noon until 3:00 p.m. It's a bit of a preach-a-thon, as seven different preachers give homilies on the seven last "words" of Christ spoken from the cross. "Woman, behold your son.... I thirst.... It is finished." Those words.

It's an old fashioned kind of thing to do I suppose. I inherited it from my predecessor. But in New York City, it's surprising who wanders into the sanctuary from Fifth Avenue on a Friday afternoon if you just open the doors. Many of the people are liturgically unaware, like so many in our secular culture, Millennials, many of whom are clueless as to the significance of a church being open on this particular Friday midday except that they notice that the doors have swung outward, the place is well lit, there is an organ playing, and a choir is singing. Inside, seven preachers, one by one, are laboring to find descriptive words to explain an agonizing death.

The congregation is a mix of people that only God could have imagined. There are Homeless ones wearing garbage bags for protection against the rain, lugging into the pews with them their worldly possessions in a torn roller bag. They slouch and sleep in the rows of back pews. There are the Regulars from the congregation who take the time away from work at lunch hour to come and stay as long as they can. There are the Wall Streeters who have the day off because the market is closed and their sins, like all of ours, are many. It does the soul good, they reckon, to spend some time amid the rituals, the words, and the music on a bleak day like this.

They and we are the motley ones "for whom Jesus has died," as we say so glibly. And if you leave the doors open, some of them come in, as if the very openness of the doors begs a response to the Biblical question "Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?"¹

Last year, we were going through the usual ritual on Good Friday. We had passed the point in the service where Mark, the gospeller, puts it plainly, "They crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take... and with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left."²

It is a somber service. Three hours are spent looking at a draped cross, gathered in a place where even the purple Lenten antependia on the pulpit and lectern have been stripped, a service in which the congregation will sing only plaintive hymns. "O Sacred Head," "O Holy Jesus," "Throned upon the Awful Tree," those hymns.

We remember on this day the details of the saddest story we know—a lonely hill outside Jerusalem's walls, the bleeding wounds on Jesus' back fresh from the flogging where the Antonian guards have laid the stripes on heavily. They have topped it all with a plait of thorns for a crown that they have pushed down on his brow. A sign is nailed above him in the discernable languages, Greek, Hebrew, and Latin, proclaiming him "King of the Jews," a charge of sedition that has put him in a bad way with the Roman authorities and is punishable by death. Not to mention his own religious leaders who *like* him for sedition (the way cops *like* a suspect on TV's *Law*

and Order), except that Sanhedrin must rely on the Romans to do their dirty work, lacking the power of life and death in their decrees.

“Father, forgive them for they know not what they do,” Jesus said to get things off to a good start. So the first word he utters is a word of forgiveness. These are not quite the first words that would have come out of my mouth!

We were well into the first hour of the service when the choir rose to sing Antonio Lotti’s *Crucifixus* in C Minor. The music begins with a slow, slightly dissonant set of vocal attacks, first from the basses, then from the tenors, then the altos, eight parts all the way up, softly singing Cru-fi-xus, emphasizing the “Cru” with more energy than the rest of the word as each section enters. And with each new section, there is a twist of dissonant sound on the second syllable, *fi*, as if the words were demonstrating something for us that we needed to hear about the nails and the wood and flesh. *Cru-ci-fixus*, they sing, “He was crucified....”

I squirmed in my seat trying to get comfortable for this three hour marathon of words and music and terrible memories. Was it my imagination, or did the words really sound like the staccato sharpness of a spike driven by a blunt hammer cutting into the flesh of a wrist?

This is, of course, exactly the effect Lotti wants the listener to experience. Staccato, sharp, dissonant chords, harsh on the ears. Across three hundred years since its composition, I hear it. Past two thousand years of time since the spikes were driven, I still can hear it.

Borg and Crossan lay out for us a vivid verbal description of what Lotti has given us in music. They tell us in words that we cannot fail to understand:

As a form of public terrorism, the uprights of the crosses were usually permanently in place just outside a city gate on a high or prominent place. The victim usually carried or dragged the cross-bar along with notice of the crime to be attached to one of those uprights at the place of execution. The only crucified body ever discovered in the Jewish homeland was a first-century victim whose arms were roped over the crossbar and whose ankle bones were pierced by iron nails on either side of the upright.... Victims were often crucified low enough to the ground that not only carrion birds, but scavenging dogs could reach them.³

And as if scholarly interest were not vivid enough, Bill O’Reilly in his book *Killing Jesus*, gives an equally chilling narrative about the real time crucifixion of Jesus. “The soldier hammers the sharpened point into Jesus’ flesh, at precisely the spot where the radius and the ulna bones meet the carpals of the wrist. He jabs the nail hard into the skin to stabilize it before impact.”⁴

“Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?” asks Jeremiah. Not much of a crowd to keep watch really, maybe a hundred souls in a sanctuary that seats twelve hundred. They came the week after 9/11 in droves, not a seat left vacant. But where are they now?

I look at the back row where the scattered men wearing garbage bags for protection from the rain are nodding, close to sleep. I look at the people who have taken time to come in out of the rain to hear the story once again, the Regulars, the Millennials. It is for such as these, for such as us, that he has died.

The words of Lotti's hypnotic repetitions circle in my head as I look at the table and study the covered cross on the communion board. It is draped with a black pall, given a central place in our line of sight while around the necks of some in the congregation are beautiful crosses.

We have, after all, made the crude means of a man's execution a piece of jewelry in silver or gold. Tiffany offers a Maltese Cross in their catalogue for a mere \$13,000 while those with a less ample budget can purchase a modest sterling silver model on a simple chain with the familiar blue box, and it will only set you back \$175. Do we really understand what we are doing, putting around our necks the prettied up symbol of an executioner's gibbet?

In a world in which ISIS decapitations and kids slaughtering classmates in school libraries with automatic weapons, a world in which bombers throw explosives into waste cans on the sidewalks beside marathon runners, perhaps we have forgotten too much of what this cross represents, the incarnation of a God who has taken human flesh and known not only our suffering, but also our death.

As the words of Lotti's *Crucifixus* continue, the words themselves evolve into something like a heartbeat, steady, even, like Jesus' heartbeat as it labors on the cross... *pro nobis*... for us. And maybe this is the part of the anthem, not to mention the gospel, that is the most difficult to understand, how it is that he dies *for us*. Paul did his best to explain it and concluded that, of course, it was foolishness at one level. It made no sense, not to Jews, not to Greeks, nor to scientific beings, informed, logical, and advanced-degree wise as we are.

But, of course, I don't want him to die *for us*. I hate sad stories. I don't want him to die at all. And if he is going to die, I don't want it to be for me. I would rather he died for the poor guys in the back row of the church who are nodding off in their garbage bag raincoats. Let him die for the Wall Streeters who have too much money, too ill gotten for their own good. Let him die for the sake of the parents who are at their wits end and have shaken their baby this morning and are being investigated by Child Protective Services. Let him die for the warlords of the drug cartels in Mexico who invade neighborhoods and run drugs, and take families across the borders of Texas and California in the back end of suffocating trucks. Let him die for someone who needs it but not for me. And for heaven's sake, don't let him die as a substitute for anyone because it placates a vengeful God who needs a blood sacrifice to pay for our sins. If God needs somebody's blood payment for a cosmic sin debt that weighs on every human soul, then I don't want anything to do with that god.

How ironic, then, that that God, the one whose begotten son is dying on this cross, is dying there for me, to demonstrate the power of love conquering loveless power. And of course it makes no sense to me. That's how God's wisdom works, as seeming foolishness to me, to us.

That is the point of his incarnation, after all, that Jesus was flesh and blood for our sake. God's wisdom is expressed in a foolish and unlikely extravagance that exceeds the ability of expressing, even at Nicaea. "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father."

Jesus was experiencing on the cross the pain of death in flesh and blood. It is a terrible way to die, spikes through the wrists, dehydration, exposure, humiliation, gasping for breath.

I think about our flesh and blood world where there is too much suffering and pain

every day. There in the congregation is the young father, the one who bounces his daughter on his lap during the children's prayer while sitting on the chancel steps, the one who has also told me what he has seen and done during his time at war. He can remember the flesh and blood on his own hands holding a friend gasping his dying breath, legs blown off by an IED in Kabul. a crucifixion close at hand and in his arms.

And thereby, Jesus dies *pro nobis*, for us:
for us who are broken in spirit and heavy laden,
for us who have hurt the ones we have promised to love,
for us who have stretched the truth, as far as arms can reach,
for us who are only flesh and blood and who try to act like our hands and
our cleverness and our money can fix whatever is wrong,
for us who are addicted and hooked and hiding lest anyone know,
for us who really don't want to be saved by Jesus because we're too
good for that, or too broken for that.

Paul tells the Corinthians, "We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." And why? Why do we preach Christ crucified? Because "God's foolishness is wiser than our wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than our strength." God has taken on flesh and blood, and it is the only way that we can truly see and understand just how real is the need and how great is the sacrifice that is required to save our hide, our flesh and blood. It is when the spikes tear his flesh and the cross beam is hoisted into place, the clothing stripped from his body, and the pain sears into his wrists and feet, that the incarnation reaches its most poignant and intended purpose. It is for this that he was born, to this that he is led, for us that he is sacrificed in flesh and blood.

None of us would have wished this for him any more than any of us wishes suffering for ourselves or for those we love. Yet he knows our suffering and takes our sin upon himself, experiencing even death itself, and so... *passus et sepultus est*... he suffered and was buried.

I look around the sanctuary once again. The Homeless folks are with us still, and the others too, the ones who came to sit and watch awhile and soak in the sadness and the hope that this day's events represent. A smattering of the Wall Streeters are sitting among the Regulars, and sprinkled in as well are the Millennials who haven't a clue as to what all this means but who are moved by the earnestness of the message and the sanctuary that has a reassuring feel. (They are not quite sure why.)

The Lotti *Crucifixus* echoes in my head as the service moves toward its inevitable end. I cannot seem to get that cross and those spikes out of my mind. We reach the last word, "It is finished." But of course it is not. Because of what we have remembered, Jesus' death on the cross, his crucifixion, we have recalled and remembered that God's love and compassion for us never ends. There is no last word; it is not finished. There is no benediction. There can't be today. There is only life in flesh and blood now finished and laid in a tomb with the hope and the prayer that that is not the end, but that God's power is greater than the power of the tomb in which Jesus' body is laid.

The service ends with a closing hymn, "Were you there when they crucified

my Lord?” Then silence. The bulletin rubric invites the worshippers to “linger and contemplate and leave silently when they are ready.”

There is no benediction on a day like today. Only silence contrasted with the noise filtering in from the street as the Homeless folks, the Wall Streeters, the Millennials, and the Regulars all make their way outside once again where the world that God loves awaits. The world with sirens screaming, horns honking, a fight breaking out between a cab driver and the driver of a car pulling out of a parking space, bending the bumpers and scraping the paint on both cars, and down the street at the urgent care center, an ambulance pulls up and the paramedics pull out the gurney and wheel in a woman who has overdosed on cocaine.

Crucifixus etiam pro nobis, sub Pontio Pilato, passus et sepultus est.

Notes

1 Lamentations 1:12.

2 Mark 15:24, 27.

3 Marcus J. Borg, John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), 146.

4 Bill O'Reilly and Martin Dugard, *Killing Jesus* (New York: Henry Holt, 2013), 248.