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Torture, Terror, and the End of Bloodshed Sacrifice

He had to die.

This itinerate preacher, teacher, faith healer had to die. This maybe son of a carpenter from Galilee, from can any good thing come out of Nazareth, Nazareth, this wine-drinker who surrounded himself with all kinds of people from the hardest thugs to aristocrats, who did not mind eating with sinners and publicans had to die. This self deluded fool who thought that he was the Son of Man and the Son of God had to die. This prophetic pretender had to die. He had to die because he was dangerous.

The man Jesus was born into the world of the Roman Empire. Rome stood astride the world with unparalleled power. Its armies marches across its known world with a ruthless brutality so that it could control trade routes and take tribute from conquered nations. Jesus was born into a society that not only lived under Roman occupation and domination, but it was a society that had been governed by a more local tyrant. Herod, put into power by Rome taxed his people heavily to support a lavish court and his building projects. He did some good for his people, giving state relief during famines, providing security and facilitating trade both far and near. However, he encouraged Greek culture and his personal morality was lax. He ruled through cruel punishments. Jewish priests and Pharisees were against him. According to historian Will Durant, when he died his enemies said of him : “he stole the throne like a fox, ruled like a tiger, and died like a dog” (535).

Further, Jesus was born into a society torn by regional and ethnic hatred, sectarian violence,

“political turbulence” and periodic war. The Jews of Judea hated the Jews of Galilee; the Galilean Jews returned the sentiment. The Judeans feuded with the Samaritans. Within the religious community the Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes understood their religion very differently. And everyone hated the Romans. Some waited on a Divine Redeemer who would bring an end to Roman domination, who would establish a kingdom on earth that would end earthly suffering. At the same time, Caligula established emperor worship as a way to unify the empire.

It was a time when the intellectual air was thick with philosophy, religion, mystery and magic. Durant tells us: “Magic and witchcraft, demons and angels, ‘possession’ and exorcism, miracles and prophecies, divination and astrology were taken for granted everywhere” (559). This is the world in which the man Jesus lived. From a child he was interested in religion. At the age of twelve he asked hard questions of the religious authorities, and as an adult he would challenge their assumptions. He saw a religion that had lost its way. Religion had become an exercise in keeping one’s obligations to the Temple and to Temple authorities while it was all too easy to sidestep the obligations of genuine human relationship. It had become a religion of law and not of love. When he found his prophetic voice, he taught that human beings ought not judge one another, and at the same time he cursed faithlessness and unfruitfulness. He stood in the traditions of the prophets who said that God requires justice and mercy above the noise of religion ceremony. Durant tells us: “His convictions consumed him; righteous indignation now and then blurred his profound humanity; his faults were the price he paid for that passionate faith which enabled him to move the world” (561).

Nations hate prophets. The powers that control religious, social, intellectual and governmental institutions hate prophets. He had to die.

He preached an inside out, bottom up revolution. A new political order would not change humankind; a new humankind would change the political order. So he sided with the poor over the rich and pronounced blessing on the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. He taught a difficult ethic of radical love: "But I say to you love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you" (Matthew 5:44) He taught that humanity ought to love with the same unconditional love with which God loves H/er creation. God sends the rain on the good and on the evil. God sends the sunlight on the just and the unjust. He says: "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father/Mother in heaven is perfect." (Matthew 5: 48)

He taught a radical love that was intended to help people move beyond all the sectarian divisions of his society. Self love expanded out to family, friends, neighbors, strangers, even enemies. He taught the Golden Rule: "Whatever you want people to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets." The all inclusive "whatever: in the New King James translation is given as "in all things" in some other translations. It is a most radical ethic. Jesus taught the fearlessness of radical love, knowing that love and fear cannot coexist. This radical love, this fearlessness would allow a person to carry a load an extra mile, to turn the other cheek in a dispute, to give up coat and cloak if asked, to give to those who would borrow. This radical ethic led to a radical political, economic and social challenge.

In his book The Politics of Jesus: Rediscovering the True Revolutionary Nature of Jesus' Teaching and How They Have Been Corrupted, biblical scholar Obery Hendricks shows how the Lord's prayer itself is a revolutionary exercise. By positing a kingdom on earth other than the empire, but suggesting the forgiveness of debts that would undermine the imperial economic

system, by asking that God keep us from the temptations of imperial power, the prayer challenged the legitimacy of the empire. I say that the prayer had and still has profound implications for a radical ethic that is no less revolutionary in its possibilities.

Our Mother/Father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name.

the name is unnamed so that possibilities of who God is and what the name of God is are infinite.

Thy kingdom come, they will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

the ethic here is the ethical obligation to know and to do the will of God above all else; the ethical obligation is not to the laws of the state, but to righteousness, justice, love and peace.

Give us this day our daily bread.

the ethic here is an ethic of the eternal now; yesterday is gone, and like the ever receding horizon, tomorrow never comes; today is all there is; such an ethic requires a faith that God will provide new mercies morning by morning.

Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

this is an ethic of sharing that opens the door to a new economy; it is a communitarian economy where everyone can have enough if we understand that the measure of our success is not in how much dead stuff we own, but rather the measure of our success is in the quality of our relationships with humanity and with nature.

Lead us not into temptation

this is an ethic of right relationship; it is social in character in that we ask that we are not tempted to abuse or to misuse anyone; again the emphasis here is on the

righteousness of relationship, both with the human and with the Divine.

Deliver us from evil

this requests helps us to understand that we rely on supernatural power to help keep us away from all manner of hurt, harm and danger; it is not only a request that deceptive, wicked, malicious, destructive, angry, spiteful, injurious people and events stay away from us, but it is a supplication that we ourselves do not become deceptive, wicked, malicious, destructive, angry, spiteful, or injurious.

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever. Amen.

here we come face to face with the largeness of the Divine and with our own powerlessness by comparison; we come face to face with the ethical obligation to live a life that would glorify God.; as Jesus says earlier that we would let the world see our good works so that it would glorify our Mother/Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:16)

This kind of teaching had political, economic and social implications that could truly transform the world and shake the empire at its foundation. This man had to die.

Thousands of people came to hear him preach. When he entered Jerusalem, people greeted him as they would greet a conquering hero. When he came against the moneychangers in the Temple, this act sealed his fate. He taught in the Temple during the day, but at night he left the city, knowing that his life was in jeopardy. He had to die. The Temple authorities knew it; they turned him over to the Roman authorities who had no problem making an example out of him. The Roman empire ruled through terror. The logic of terror is that if people are afraid enough,

they will give power to people who will keep them safe; if people are afraid enough, they will not revolt against unjust powers and unjust systems. Fear keeps people in check.

Everyone knew that to threaten the empire in any way was a capital offense, and crucifixion was the method of punishment. Before crucifixion came a brutal beating. They beat him all night long until his body was a bloody, swollen mess. Cicero called crucifixion “the most cruel and hideous of tortures” (572). A person was tied and or nailed to the cross, the offender would often hang there for days before they died. They would be eaten alive by insects, no food, no water, as the body slowly gave way to gravity. To have one’s legs broken so that asphyxiation would occur sooner was a blessing. This torturous death was intended to put terror in the hearts and minds of the general population to keep them in line. This is how empires keep power.

Torture, terror and war. From the cross, Jesus, a man whose love for God had been so complete that he understood himself to be the Son of God, who came to preach, teach and live a faith so profound that it could have world changing possibilities, suffered a suffering that broke the connection with God. “My God, My God why have you forsaken me.” It is a desolation, a disconnection, a loneliness, a lovelessness that is complete. Before he dies he says: “It is finished.”

Christian doctrine has taught us that this horrible death was necessary to save us from our sins. It has taught us that the justice of God demanded such. I say that if that is so, then it is finished. Jesus paid it all. He ought to have been the last bloodshed sacrifice. It is finished. However, all too often, when we want to justify our wars, we do it in the name of a necessary bloodshed sacrifice to achieve some righteous end. The nation asks its citizens to go to war, to participate in organized murder for the sake of itself and we call it in the words of Abraham Lincoln “the last full measure of devotion.” However, Lincoln also says in the Gettysburg

Address that the work of the dead soldiers is unfinished. “It is for us, the living, rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced.” Since the bloodshed sacrifice of Jesus, no bloodshed sacrifice is enough. Only Jesus could say it is finished. He lived to end the cult of bloodshed sacrifice. It is finished. Eternal salvation is ours. It is finished. What is not finished is temporal salvation, the work of saving creation, of saving humanity, of saving our relationships. And this is work of bloodlived sacrifice.

The Apostle Paul writes: “I beseech you therefore, by the mercies of God that you present your bodies a living sacrifice holy, acceptable to God which is your reasonable service. And to not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Romans 12: 1-2) The will of God is righteousness; the will of God is justice; the will of God is a radical love that loves completely, perfectly. The will of God is to live the love, not to shed blood. War is not the will of God. Sharing, caring the inside out, upside down revolution of self and society is the will of God. The will of God is peace.

Works Cited

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- Hendricks, Obery M. The Politics of Jesus: Rediscovering the True Revolutionary Nature of Jesus’ Teaching and How They Have Been Corrupted. New York: Doubleday, 2006.

