

Good Friday - April 18, 2014
Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10:16-25
(or Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Let us understand and capture some of the sense of tragedy that occurred with the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. Tragedy. Tragedy is a dreadful, often fatal, event which has no satisfactory explanation. There is no clear cut reason for the crucifixion and no clear-cut bad guy on whom we can place the blame. There are absurd and irrational elements in tragedy, often involving the best as well as the worst of human intentions. The crucifixion was such a tragedy. We see this interplay of best and worst intentions in the cross itself, and in the religious and political settings leading to the crucifixion.

After all, as William Sloane Coffin pointed out, “Jesus didn’t die at the hands of [bad guys] – muggers or rapists, leaders of organized crime or other thugs. [Instead,] he fell into the well-scrubbed [morally vigorous] hands of ministers and lawyers, statesmen and professors [of law] – society’s most respected members.”¹ Recall that Jesus stood before the leaders of the religious council called the Sanhedrin. The best of human piety came into play, namely, the insistence that God is One, and that only God can claim to be God and act as God. However, this piety was situated in a very human dilemma. The dilemma was that the Sanhedrin saw that it would be better that one person die for the many so that the religious leaders and their followers would not lose what little freedom they had brokered from their Roman overlords. On Jesus’ side, the cross became the inevitable consequence of trying to change attitudes and behaviors of these super-righteous leaders. It’s important to note that for Jesus his cross is more about living than dying—more about seeking truthful living and justice, and changes that these require—than passively accepting a certain fate or death, for it takes a whole lot of committed living to be selected as a target for martyrdom – a cross. We must also be very careful to point out on this day of all days that the piety that convicted Jesus was in no way flawed by its Jewishness. It bears repeating that Jesus was himself a Jew from a long and strong prophetic tradition. He was not rejected by the Jewish people who in fact, followed him in crowds, crowds sizeable enough for him to be seen as a real threat to certain special interests and certain powerful leaders. These leaders had reached an uneasy accommodation with the Roman authorities and were most intent on collaborating with the Roman occupation to protect what power they had. Further, it must be said that the best of that piety which concluded that Jesus should be put to death can also be found in all other non-Jewish expressions and traditions of human piety throughout history and around the world – and such is the tragic element in the best of human piety and its limitations, whatever form it takes from temple, church, mosque – wherever.

And so, Jesus’ death was justified by a deep, albeit certain, monotheistic piety, and supported by a democratic process whereby his death was voted on by the Sanhedrin. As well, his death was supported by a utilitarian ethic practiced in all human cultures that stated that one should die for the many. This led to the Cross – a Roman cross. For martyrs are martyred for political reasons ultimately, not theological.

We also recall that Jesus was then to stand before Pontius Pilate. The best of human law at that time came into play, namely, an insistence on proof of guilt, an interest in order and yet also liberty, and a desire for democratic processes to be involved in at least some decision-making. However, this law was situated in the very human dilemma of how to maintain order over and amongst a diverse population ruled by a coercive and brutal imperial structure. Pilate had to maintain law and order and harmony among conquered peoples, some of whom were plotting revolution. A limited type of democratic process voted Jesus' death sentence in the public courtyard—the same ethics that one should die to preserve the Roman version of peace.

Two of the most ancient and noble pillars of human civilization – religion and law – together supported the necessity of putting Jesus to death. The cross on which he was placed stands for the tragic folly of humanity, not so much at our worst, but at our human best which has been distorted by all sorts of *expedient* accommodations to fear and ignorance, certainty and violence.

It is a very real tragedy that we encounter on this day. It's hard for many of us to feel it because we know the happy ending. Yet, what we have is the real tragedy of Love's labor lost, which is a very common tragedy. But there is even more, much more. Jesus needn't have died. Presumably he could have followed the advice of friends like Peter and avoided the showdown. Instead he submits to death so that the world may be redeemed somehow for God's purposes of wholeness, justice and community. Thus, the cross is the full meaning and consequence of our folly and sinfulness and also the full meaning and measure of God's redeeming power and love. There is an ultimate tragedy here: even the Love of God is crushed and dies. God's Love is not too strong to die. God did not "slip through" the crucifixion. Jesus died by our well-scrubbed hands as the hated love of God, and in the profoundest sense alone as the God-forsaken God.ⁱⁱ

We have not just a story of poignant love, but one of tragedy without explanation, involving the best and the worst, of long ago and right now. Humanity is still bound to the same righteous certitude and fearful divisiveness that put Jesus on the Cross. The greatest tragedy in our day is, as Martin Luther King, Jr. put it, that so many people are forced to bear the cross for those who "possess power without compassion, might without morality and strength without sight."ⁱⁱⁱ

There is meaning in all this, though; and it is expressed best when we hear it in its most personal form: God's Love would die for me. God's Love would die for you. Jesus showed us that a life given away for love's sake is the life truly worth living. In this, God vindicates his Love out of tragedy; and we don't need to rush to Easter to know this. But do come back though for the rest of the story.

ⁱ William Sloane Coffin, Living the Truth in a World of Illusions (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 53.

ⁱⁱ Therefore the cross stands for the inevitable dereliction and defeat of the best—the God who lived and died as one of us—and the worst, namely the powers of ignorance, fear, expediency and evil.

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin Luther, King, Jr., Speech "We Must Speak" delivered at Riverside Church, April 4, 1967