

Victim or Victor?

Matthew 28

sermon digest

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larry dipboye

Last Friday I heard an interview of John Dominic Crossan on NPR-Fresh Air, "Jesus and Crucifixion, a Historical View." Crossan left the Roman Catholic priesthood in 1969 and became professor of biblical studies (now emeritus) at DePaul University. He has written several books on the Gospels reflecting his work with the Jesus Seminar, an ongoing gathering of New Testament scholars around the critical textual study of the Gospels. As co-director of the Jesus Seminar, Crossan has been one of the more cynical voices in his estimate of the history behind the Gospels. His book *Who Killed Jesus?* documents much of what he had to say in the interview about the Roman practice of crucifixion.

Crossan noted that this was one of three forms of execution adopted by the Roman State to terrorize slaves and lower classes to maintain submission. Burning alive, releasing the victim to be devoured by wild beasts in a public arena, and crucifixion were intended not only to produce unspeakable torture, but public humiliation and total annihilation. Roman citizens and the aristocracy were often allowed the alternative of self-execution, suicide, to maintain their dignity and preserve their estate. Crucifixion went far beyond mere execution. For rebellious slaves, lower class criminals or revolutionaries, Rome intended to make a public example and deprive the victim's friends and family of a respectful burial. The body was normally left on the cross on public display until nothing was left to bury. Jewish law prohibited leaving a body hanging on a tree for even the worst of criminals. Crossan observed that burials were possible, if the family were able to persuade or bribe an official to release the body, but this was the exception rather than the norm. If one takes literally the report of Josephus that as many as 500 crucifixions a day took place during the Roman invasion of Jerusalem in 70 CE, the sadistic spectacle is beyond comprehension.

Two extremes tend to distort the gospel of Christ. Both the Gospel accounts of the death of Jesus and the secular records of Roman history describe crucifixion as pure horror, Roman rule by fear. Christian theology and preaching have tended to drift into two extremes—a sadistic obsession with the cross or a blind optimism that attempts to avoid all reference to any unpleasant element in the Gospels. The message of Lent and especially Good Friday often focuses on the darkness, on the death of Jesus to the exclusion of the resurrection. The Tennebrae Good Friday service is a traditional service of shadows that involves the extinguishing of candles on the altar. Yet, one candle is always left burning on the altar. We are reminded that the forty days of Lent from Ash Wednesday to Easter do not count Sundays, because every Lord's Day is a weekly celebration of the resurrection of Christ.

Crossan is a biblical historian, who rightly refuses to censor historical data just because it is offensive. Like a scientist who finds unexpected results of a laboratory experiment, the historian is not allowed to exclude data just because it is unpleasant. One has to wonder, however, if some of Crossan's cynical speculation about Jesus is good history or just a tendency to look on the dark side. Since much of interpretation is left to subjective speculation rather than to hard facts, the attitude of the historian is a factor.

Sensationalizing death by crucifixion in Christian pulpits has sometimes rivaled horror movies in sadistic appeal. I can recall a few sermons that I heard in my youth that detailed the process of crucifixion and the suffering of Christ to the point of creating a cringe effect in the congregation. The prevalence of the crucifix in Christian art as well as the portrayal of the dead body of Jesus being removed from the cross and prepared for burial are often grotesque and seem to appeal more to the sensational and the sadistic than to devotion to Christ. In our critical review of classical art, we need to keep in mind the medieval experience of life. The common practice of sadistic torture by the Church and the State, the absence of any real medical relief from disease or pain, and the limited life-expectancy naturally led to a realistically negative picture of life as suffering.

On the other extreme, Christians have chosen to avoid the cross altogether in favor of a gospel of positive thinking. I recall a rather controversial book written by a seminary professor in 1959, *Saved By His Life*, in which the author challenged the obsession of Christian theologians with the cross. Theodore Clark took exception to the numerous "bloody hymns" in our songbooks and our sentimental journey with the cross. His point was well-taken. He cited Paul, "For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life," (Romans 5:10) and made a case for a larger view of the saving work of Christ that includes the incarnation and ministry of Jesus, the whole Christ.

The victim of the cross is the victor of the resurrection. Jürgen Moltman finds the cross and resurrection to be inseparable in the Gospels. Every moment in the story of Jesus is viewed through the window of Easter. Without the resurrection, none of the rest of the story would matter or would have been remembered or recorded. The promise of the resurrection revealed in the act of God in Christ stands in the face of the worst horror that we can possibly experience or imagine, the horror of the cross. So, the Gospels do not leap from cross to resurrection as if they were disconnected. The sheer terror of the cross continues to abide in the minds of the disciples and presents an embarrassment especially to the first generation of Christians that involves several explanations of

meaning that we speak of as “the atonement.”

Gustaf Aulen in *Christus Victor* reviewed the historical explanations of the meaning of Christ's death in the theological theories of the atonement. He noted his preference for the classical theory, the earliest explanation in Christian history, that Jesus' death on the cross was God's way of defeating the powers of darkness in the world. Jesus becomes victim of the worst kind of evil imaginable and emerges from the conflict as victor.

The Gospels are weighted toward the passion of Christ with several references of prediction and anticipation leading up to extensive detail about the crucifixion of Jesus. Especially in Matthew, we do not have a wall of separation between the cross and the resurrection. The conflict with “the Jews” is carried into the resurrection story and Jewish leadership is accused of attempting to create a rumor that the body was stolen by the disciples to perpetrate a hoax of Jesus' resurrection. So, Matthew introduces Roman guards at the tomb who evidently faint into unconscious fear when the earthquake rumbles and an angel removes the stone unsealing the tomb. Gospels make no attempt to describe the resurrection of Jesus like they do the crucifixion. Matthew may be suggesting that the earthquake was the moment of resurrection, but he cites no direct witness to the raising of Jesus, only the invitation to see the empty place where the body lay. Here, Jesus is not just the dearly departed loved one; he is, “Jesus who was crucified.”

On Easter morning, we are not about the business of denial, attempting to avoid the bad stuff that we find to be unpleasant. Eventually we have to face the darkness. It is there, a part of life, and a reality of the experience of every living person. We are also not about the business of obsession. The cross stands in the church as a monument to the victory of Christ over the powers of darkness. We cannot appreciate the victory without opening our eyes to the victim. We cannot find meaning in suffering apart from the eternal promise of God in Christ.

A few years ago I heard an address by Branko Lovrec the president of the Baptist Union of Croatia. The meeting was in the springtime at the center of the Easter season, shortly after the Croatian war that involved some of the worst acts of genocide in modern times. Lovrec recalled a story from the days of the old Soviet Union when the Communist regime was intent on wiping out all remnants of religion. Some 5,000 people were gathered for a lecture by a government representative on the futility of the Christian faith denying the reality of God and any truth in the Christian gospel. As a pretense of fair play, the officials pulled an elderly priest out of prison to stand before the people to refute the official party line. The old priest was shaken and frightened as he stepped to the microphone. After a pause to gather his thoughts, he uttered only two words, “*Christos voskrese!*” (Christ is risen.) And 5,000 people responded with the ancient doxology of Easter: “*Voistinu voskrese!*” (He is risen indeed.)

Decades of State censorship of religion had not destroyed the center of Christian faith in the hearts of the people. “Christ is risen” is the ancient shout of victory that triggered the deeply rooted response, “He is risen indeed.” Through the power of God, the victim has become the victor. “Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ”!