

Communion with Saints

Hebrews 11:13-16; 32-40

communion meditation

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What a strange thing we do here today! On Worldwide Communion Sunday we gather at the Table with Christians around the world, also with Christians from the dawn of Christian faith, to demonstrate our community with in Christ. The theology of the Eucharist for Catholics and for Protestants come together in the suffering and death of Jesus of Nazareth enacted at the Table: the bread is Christ's body; the cup is his blood. Early Christians were accused by Romans of cannibalism for these words of consecration.

The Eucharist commemorates the death of Jesus on the cross, perhaps the most horrible means of torture ever devised by the demons of hell. When Paul declared to Philippian (3:10-11) Christians that he longed to know Christ and to share in his sufferings to become like him in his death, was this just rhetoric or a statement of the essence of the Christian faith? Was his longing fulfilled at the Table or was it an invitation to actual martyrdom?

Martyrdom precedes Christianity. The word comes before the act. The Greek word is *martyreo*. The root meaning is "to bear witness." In secular use, it was largely a legal term used like the testimony of a witness in a modern court scene. The technical expansion of *martyreo* to refer to dying for the faith was influenced by the revolutionary history of the Jews during the Maccabean era. In the Maccabean age, 150 years before Christ, those who suffered for Torah were known as *qedoshim*, "people set apart," equivalent to the Christian *saint*. In Acts 22:20, Paul tells his story and refers to "the blood of your witness (*martyros*) Stephen," not because of Stephen's death, but because of his witness to Jesus at the time of his death. In the Fourth Gospel (John) and Revelation, the association of witness with suffering and death begins to take on some of the later meaning in church history. Jesus is the first witness, whose word is sealed by his death. Eventually the word evolved from giving a factual report on the life of Jesus to including the suffering of Christ and the persecution of Christians. Finally martyrdom was shaped by stories from the trials and executions of Christians by the Romans. In the Roman trials, the accused was allowed opportunity of apostasy, to deny the faith and burn incense to Caesar. Thus, torture and death were inseparable from the words of witness.

On 9/11/2001, I attended a small gathering of Rotary friends for dinner. The conversation was supposed to be about Club business, but we could not get beyond the events of the day. I was asked that evening, "Didn't Christians practice and encourage acts of suicidal martyrdom in the early centuries?" My immediate response was, "some early Christians were guilty of self-destructive acts but never murder." In retrospect, I would have to acknowledge that both the glorification of martyrdom and the promise of immediate, heavenly reward are common to the practice and thought of early Christians and 21st century terrorists. Similarity does not prove influence, but neither can one ignore the ready availability of historical data as a source of military and political strategy. Martin Luther King, Jr., was both a student of history and a Christian theologian in advocating non-violent, passive resistance to unjust laws that became martyrdom for some including King himself. King acknowledged the direct influence of Christ and Gandhi on his political strategy for social reformation through civil disobedience. The will to suffer and to die for a cause is sometimes the only power left for oppressed people to use in confronting tyranny. Martyrdom is a powerful weapon, the means of last resort, for people without a voice in the social hierarchy.

In this regard, Christians are not alone in honoring heroes who have suffered and died for a cause. The Romans took pleasure in honoring their fallen heroes, as have Nazis, Marxists, and terrorists in modern times. We are all aware of unholy causes for which people have given up their very lives, and we are led to wonder why. What prompted the Japanese kamikaze to fly planes loaded with explosives into battleships or the terrorists who flew passenger planes into the World Trade Center? I raised this question rhetorically in an ORICL class and one of my friends answered quickly about the 9/11 terrorists, "the promise of 72 virgins in heaven." Are mercenaries, soldiers of fortune, to be viewed on the same level as martyrs when the cause for which they die is money?

I suppose the question that is most important to Christians is, What are we doing or saying here

that is so different? The Hebrews parade of the faithful concludes with an observation of the life of faith that ended in suffering and death for many, not all, of the heroes. The preacher of Hebrews notes the high cost in human suffering that the faithful have given for the calling of God in Jewish history. The writer continues to note the unfinished business of faith in any generation; "All of these died in faith without having received the promises." Finally we are met with a challenge. Now the faith is in our hands.

Unnecessary human suffering should never be glorified. Even in the early Christian centuries of persecution by Rome and the dawn of Christian martyrdom, the Church put out a mixed message. Although the martyrs were heroes, people were advised to avoid martyrdom when possible. Sometimes a fine line separates the authentic martyr and the sadist-masochist. The common complaint about Mel Gibson's 2004 movie "The Passion of the Christ" was the sensational focus on violence and the unnecessary, even sadistic, portrayal of human agony. It was compared by some with the growing popularity of the "slasher" movies that glorify gore and devalue human life, thus, typical of other Mel Gibson "adventure" movies. Others have noted the box office success; the movie earned \$84,000,000 the first week end of its release. Even believing as I do in the vicarious suffering of Christ for the whole world, I do not believe that Gibson's movie does an ounce of justice to the meaning of the cross.

Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner tells of attending a rally in Memphis in 1974 in which a prominent conservative Christian leader instructed abused women to go home and submit to their abusive husbands in order to win them over to the Lord. This seminary professor was caused to rethink the meaning of her faith. She observed that women and minorities are not attracted to the invitation to more sacrifice, suffering, and abuse. One out of four women in the U.S. is raped, one out of three girls is sexually abused, and at least one-third of our families are violent places to grow up. Something is wrong with the call to self-sacrifice and submission, especially when the call comes from bullies.

Beyond the question of martyrdom we give witness to a universal communion of human suffering. The communion with saints that we celebrate today offers neither comfort nor respect for the tyrants in politics or family that bring down unnecessary agony on the lives of the weak and defenseless. I refuse to accept the old theodicies that attribute to God the unthinkable pain that comes with disease, natural disaster, and accidents so that we may experience bliss in the life to come.

As we gather at the Table today, we are saying something very important about the nature of God and the meaning of human suffering. In the agony of the Christ on the cross and of the martyrs of faith through the centuries, I see a *koinonia*, a communion of human suffering that binds us together in mutual respect and compassion. That is the *koinonia* of the church. Through communion with fellow sufferers in God's world, we have *koinonia*/communion with God in Christ. The pain of the world in which we share is not necessarily our choice. But the faith we share points to the choice of our God. God in Christ has experienced the world and its pain.