

20 Years Later

Yesterday marked 20 years since the horrific attack on 9/11.

Since that time, our nation has engaged in two wars, in Afghanistan and Iraq, spent trillions of dollars and lost thousands of military lives and hundreds of thousands of innocent civilian lives.

These wars began with a "born again" Christian as our President and have ended with a devout Roman Catholic President.

And both the Evangelical and the Roman Catholic vowed to never forget, never forgive and to retaliate without mercy against any and all acts of aggression.

All of which makes our gospel today so crucial.

Because today's gospel asks the central question of our faith: who do we say Jesus is?

Is he a radical revolutionary supporting guerrilla war against Roman occupation?

Is he a "head in the clouds" spiritual leader teaching us to muddle through in this world until we die and can get into heaven?

Or is he the fullness of God in our midst?

Coaxing and cajoling and challenging us to rethink what this life, and how we live it, is all about?

Jesus is about to tell us, in his explosive confrontation with Peter, what the difference is between human religion and God's dream for humanity.

It's the difference between our best thinking -- and God's best thinking.

It's perhaps the most crucial conversation in the entire Gospel.

Not just then, but today too.

Because we live in a world drowning in human religion.

Whether it's civil religion that worships the economy or significant swaths of what passes for Christianity -- human religion is perhaps the most dangerous invention ever created.

Worse than nerve gas.

Worse than the bomb.

Human religion is about human control pretending to have God's blessing.

Which is a most dangerous combination.

ISIS and Fascism and Nationalism are all human religions.

Dedicated to pitting one group against another.

Christianity becomes a human religion when we say that Jesus died not only for us, but **instead** of us.

Rather than coming to see that Jesus indeed died for us, but precisely so that **we too may learn how to die.**

To ourselves.

To our best thinking.

To our love affair with controlling people, places and things.

And it's human religion that Peter has in mind when he confesses Jesus as the Messiah.

Peter knows the word "Messiah."

But he completely misses the meaning!

He's thinking power and prestige and glory.

And Jesus confronts this thinking with an anger and a rejection seen nowhere else in all of the gospels.

"Jesus utterly rejects the thinking that says religion is something we do — rather than something we are.

Religion as 'something we do' creates people who prefer the security of ritual and magic and the clubroom, to the insecurity" of mercy and kindness and grace. Jennings, *The Insurrection of the Crucified*, 127, modified.

"Get behind me Satan!"

Because this kind of thinking is indeed Satanic.

It seeks to replace mercy and forgiveness and grace that can only be born out of suffering and surrender, with the privilege and power and prestige that come from looking out for number one.

Peter, like me, wants to lead Jesus, rather than follow him.

I try to lead Jesus whenever I secretly whisper to myself that it's naive to love our enemies.

To forgive wrongs.

To refuse to kill.

To welcome the stranger.

I try to lead Jesus when I use every trick in the book to tame the unpredictably wild message of the gospel.

When I spend my time feathering my own comfortable nest.

When the bum at the corner is dismissed by me as that bum at the corner, rather than acknowledged as a beloved child of God.

And Jesus is having none of it!

Instead, he tells us loud and clear, "get behind me!

Follow me to a place that you cannot imagine."

A place where you "jump first, for only then will the net appear."

Jesus doesn't make these demands only on his inner circle, folks like the clergy or monks or nuns!

Because while he chews out Peter in private, when it's time to help us see what God's true dream is for all of us, he brings in the crowd, gathering us all in tight, as he explains.

It's about the cross.

Another badly misunderstood word that we have used and abused over the centuries.

Taking up our cross isn't about Lenten sacrifices of chocolate or red wine.

Nor inventing ways to suffer.

And it certainly doesn't mean that if you're in an abusive relationship, you stay.

If you're in an abusive relationship, leave!

Taking up the cross means to take the side of the poor and the marginalized.

To surrender our obsessions with controlling people, places and things, on a daily and sometimes hourly basis,.

It means embracing the power of non-violence.

And the frightening challenge that non-violence creates.

To place my body over yours as the club swings down.

It means rejecting the jingoistic hyperbole that is even now closing our borders and denying basic human dignity to our sisters and brothers, solely to protect the privileges and wealth we have come to enjoy.

Privileges and wealth exploited from the very people and cultures we now so fervently bar from our shores.

This is the difference between human religion and God's dream for humanity.

We create religions that categorize and criminalize.

But Jesus insists that God's dream for humanity is that we rediscover that we are each and every one of us sisters and brothers of one God.

Who is the source of every slice of bread.

Of every cup of cold water.

Because, nothing in this world his MINE.

It's all God's.

So that **everything** belongs to **everyone**.

A truth many of our island people know, to the great chagrin of most westerners.

But isn't that precisely what Jesus is saying today?

"If any want to be my disciples, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow me."

The price of following Jesus is the price of giving away our life.

"But here's the thing.

We tend to think that life is something you go out and get.

Or earn.

Or buy.

Or win.

But it turns out that life, is like love!

It can't be won or earned or bought.

It can only be given away.

And the more you give away, the more you have." David Lose, modified.

It's a truth discovered by every person who has ever traveled to some distant land with the intention of "helping the less fortunate."

Every one of them returns with the joy of discovering that in seeking to give, one receives immeasurably in return.

It's a life of subtraction.

Subtracting my need to be the most important person in the room.

Subtracting my need to be in charge.

Subtracting my compulsion to achieve security and safety.

And as we subtract these things — something begins to happen.

The contentment that eludes us as we chase after security is graciously given — once we surrender the chase.

The peace we so desperately try to obtain through controlling others blossoms — the moment I let go of control.

Yesterday marked 20 years after the horrific attack on September 11.

And I have asked before and will ask again:

What might have been if our born again Christian President had done what only a few were willing to do?

That instead of seeking revenge, had stood on that rubble pile and said to the attackers:

“We forgive you.

We will suffer this injury.

This loss.

This death.

As a nation, in this moment in history, we will embrace the foolishness of God, and refuse retaliation.”

Most will say: “That’s completely naïve!”

“Foolish, wishful thinking, and probably suicidal too!”

All true.

It is as naïve and foolish and suicidal as the God who delivers us by dying at our hands.

And yet I wonder, if we had reacted as Christians, where we might be today?

As a nation?

As a world?

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