

Why?

At first glance, today's gospel lesson seems to be quite shocking.

After all, how can a group of people dedicated to inclusion, healing, and compassion, arouse such hatred in others?

Why on earth should the followers of the merciful teacher be subjected to imprisonment, torture, and death?

Why is it that the poet, when he's asked why he's a Christian, and not a Hindu or Buddhist, says this:

"Because no other faith makes me want to yell out: 'crucify him!'"

These questions are especially important today because we live in times when the very definition of Christianity is up for grabs.

Is Christianity a "me and you Jesus" relationship, which you better have, or you'll burn in hell?

Is Christianity about being part of the right denomination, with its rules and regulations, and if you're not in the right club, then you too are toast?

Or is Christianity not so much about towing the right line, but about becoming something like yeast?

That invisible, but unrelenting force, that creates — metanoia?

A pathway to encountering the mind of God?

How do we understand our faith?

What is it calling us to?

To answer these questions, let's pay attention to people who took Jesus at his word, and found themselves in the bull's-eye of those with power.

Some of them are on the front of today's bulletin.

Like, the missionary women who, 42 years ago next month, were brutally raped and murdered in the country named for our savior, El Salvador.

Maura Clarke, Jean Donovan, Ita Ford, and Dorothy Kazel dedicated their lives to the poor farmers of that ravaged country.

A country rich with death squads, mostly trained in the United States.

A country that deems everybody who sides with the poor to be enemies of the state.

These four women laid down their lives for the gospel.

Think of Dorothy Day and her daughter Martha (who will be visiting us in January).

Dorothy Day founded the Catholic Worker, and was repeatedly imprisoned for daring to speak out against social injustice and war.

Her daughter Martha was just released from prison for participating in an anti-nuclear protest.

Funny how when people splash blood on bombs, those in power are outraged.

But when bombs splash blood on people, those in power smile with satisfaction.

And on this day when we celebrate the feast of Queen Lili`uokalani, who can forget her embrace of the Christian faith, and her utter determination to give up all she had for the sake of her faith and for the sake of her people?

Illegally removed by gangsters and thugs, she could have turned to violence and summoned her people to rebellion.

Instead, she let go, and at great personal cost, she let things be.

Always with the hope that one day, the sleeping giant of the Hawaiian people, of the Hawaiian culture, of Hawaiian values, would awaken once again, as indeed it has over these last 50 years of the Hawaiian renaissance.

What binds together the lives of the two Dorothys, of Ita, Jean, Maura, Martha, and the Queen, is that they discovered, and staked their lives on, the outrageous, inflammatory message at the heart of the gospel.

That message is this: God owns this world.

And all that is in it.

And all who occupy it.

It's an outrageous and inflammatory message because, let's face it, most of us are convinced that WE are in charge.

And IF there's a God, then once God did his creation thing, he handed us the keys, leaving us to our own devices, and said "good luck!"

Not so, according to Jesus!

Jesus insists that God is not a distant, disinterested God.

Jesus insists that God is closer to us than our breath.

This God who, every moment of every day, wills all that is into existence.

Sun, moon and sky, and every hair on your head, every finger on my hand.

We live and move and have our being within the all encompassing womb of God.

Sit with that image for a moment.

Then sit with the image of God, at this moment, causing all of creation to exist in the ever present NOW.

No wonder we gather each week, to say thank you.

And there is this.

God is also the One who suffers with us in our suffering.

God is a God who knows the heights and depths, and anxiety, of deep suffering.

Jesus, weeping at the tomb of his dearest friend, Lazarus.

Jesus, sweating blood in the garden, asking that the cup be lifted from him.

Jesus, crying out on the cross: "My God my God why have you forsaken me?"

In Jesus, God knows, through bitter experience, our sufferings, our anxieties, our needs.

The early Christians stepped into the shoes of Jesus after his ascension because they came to know and love this vulnerable God who walks right beside us.

And because they came to know and love this vulnerable God, these early Christians refused to pay even insincere lip service to the gods of Rome.

And that gets them killed.

Jesus sees it coming.

So he warns them.

Does that same warning resonate today?

What price ought Christians be willing to pay today in the face of the blasphemy of spending nearly a trillion dollars a year on weapons of war?

What price ought Christians be willing to pay to support single mothers with money, jobs and safe homes — so that abortion can be drastically reduced?

Can we put an end to capital punishment?

Because all life is sacred!

And can we as a people reject the gratuitous sex and degrading language that contaminates our televisions and tablets under the guise of entertainment?

Can we as a people insist that wealth be distributed fairly?

That mental and physical health care is a basic human right?

That no child should go to bed hungry?

We Christians make up over 1/3 of the world's population.

1 in 3 profess Christ as Lord and Savior.

What a force we'd be if we dared to exchange the ridiculous caricatures we've made of Jesus for the deep scandal of the actual gospels.

What a force we'd be if we'd embrace, here and now, obedience to the radical call of Jesus to really follow him, no matter the cost.

Jesus knows that such obedience often carries with it a steep price.

When Jesus tells his friends to pick up their cross and follow, it's obedience that lets them follow.

And yet obedience, as frightening as it sometimes seems, is the only way to real hope.

To genuine freedom.

To lasting salvation.

Doing things our way, whether by building the Tower of Babel or worshipping at the altar of Wall Street, whether by admiring the Temple in Jerusalem or surrendering our souls to "our way of life"; doing things "our way" leads only to division.

To separation.

To death.

It's obedience to God that opens a path to the unexpected.

To the delightful.

To the truly miraculous.

We hear it when the prophet sees a world so different from the world in which we now live, where:

"The wolf and the lamb feed together, and the lion eats straw like the ox . . . where they shall no longer hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain."

God's way offers a different way to live life.

And the path to that new way is "obedience."

We practice obedience in the breaking and sharing of the bread and of the cup; where each of us, no matter our class, race or gender, extend hands to receive the very One whose hands we are to be in the world today.

We practice obedience in our prayers.

In fighting for a just wage.

And in worship.

Today, Jesus gathers us in with the 12 disciples.

He asks us two questions:

“What will happen to you if you live out the life-changing call of the gospel?”

And then, more pointedly, “What will happen if you don’t?”

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