

The Cross

If you had only known what would bring you peace

Reflection 20 in the series “The Last Great New Command”

So, as Luke tells us, there was Jesus wending his way toward Jerusalem up and over the Mount of Olives riding on the colt of a donkey and being hailed by a crowd of his followers shouting, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” Matthew adds that the crowd was very large and that some were spreading their cloaks on the road before him and others were cutting branches from the trees and spreading them before him, and everywhere the crowd was shouting, “Hosanna. [Praise.] Hosanna to the Son of David!”

But somewhere along the route Jesus sees the city of Jerusalem. And it is an amazing sight. It is today. It was then. Jerusalem is still captivating nestled as it is up in the Judean hills. You round a bend, or you come over the crest of the hill, and you see Jerusalem, and it takes your breath away. And there is still nothing like the magic of a Sabbath Eve at the Western Wall. The centuries fade away, and reveal something ancient and timeless beyond imagination.

But it is almost impossible to recapture what Jerusalem meant to Jews in the time of Jesus. The Empire may have had Rome, but they had Jerusalem. God lived in Jerusalem! The gold of its Temple glistened in the sunlight. Or it was silhouetted against the moonlight. It was the City of David, a world capital before there was a Rome. It evoked all the nation’s greatest glories and darkest tragedies. The hopes and fears of the nation centered on Jerusalem. First-century Judaism was Jerusalem.

So now with his disciples shouting “Peace,” Jesus weeps and says, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.”

If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace! And in fact this has been a theme of the writer Luke from the very first chapter. He tells of Jesus coming into a world where everywhere there was violence and conflict: the cries of injustice from an occupied people, the anger of competing religious creeds, a nation religiously devouring itself, each little group claiming to be right with God, claiming to speak for God, and looking down contemptuously on everyone else, the quick flash of a Zealot’s knife finding its target in the crowded streets of Jerusalem, the roads lined with crosses and hanging bodies.

And Luke declares that from the very beginning the Messianic agenda has always been Peace. So the father of John the Baptist, Zechariah, will prophesy that “All this will happen – the birth of his son John and the birth of Mary’s boy – “to guide our feet into

the path of peace” (Luke 1:79). It’s the same thing the angels said to the shepherds out in the fields around Bethlehem that night a few months later (in Luke 2:14): “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” It’s the vision of Isaiah, of swords beaten into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks (2:1-4), of one who will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end (9:6-7), of the wolf living with the lamb (11:6-9). It’s the message of the Sermon on the Mount. It’s the reason for the Sermon on the Mount: “Turn the other cheek.” “Go the second mile.” “Love your enemies.” And now it’s Jesus weeping over Jerusalem, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace.”

So let’s consider some of the things that were going on in Jesus’ mind in that moment. The week he faces. Yes, the moment of power: the cleansing of the Temple. And the Last Supper. But then betrayal, arrest, trial, beating, scourging, all leading to excruciating death by crucifixion. Why? Why does he have to do this? What’s going on in Jesus’ mind as his crowds are shouting their Hosannas?

Yes, he dies to destroy the dark force inside each of us – to save us from our own incapacitating sense of wrongness. He becomes our ransom. He took what was against us, Paul says in Colossians 2:13-15 – that stood against us – and nailed it to the cross. He snatched the accusation from deep down in our souls and paid it off himself so that we could know that we stand before God justified.

And so, yes, Christ died for sins once for all. It’s done. It’s taken care of – to bring you, to bring me, to God, to show us that the way back home is open: so that now finally at the cross we can see that at the heart of the universe there is love – not accusation. Christ died for sin. He is, in this sense, the ransom. He disarms the force of accusation at the heart of being human, and triumphs over it to bring us to God, to bring us all to God, this incredible God who is Love.

But there is more. And on a very basic human level, this I believe Jesus had to be thinking as he considers the appalling week ahead: What if he offers himself to be ravaged by evil in its most horrific form! What if he absorbs the anger of the world! Maybe, just maybe, when people really see this, when they are finally touched by it, they will stop and think; maybe, just maybe, they’ll quit being so absorbed by themselves. What if he lets the men of power and violence kill him! What if he accepts suffering from everyone, Jews and Romans alike, rather than inflicting suffering on anyone! Could he thereby unmask human violence – show its essential absurdity? Could he maybe get the world to see how we’re always scapegoating people, to see how our violence is almost always displaced largely on those who are innocent?¹ Could he possibly get us to see how when we feel wronged by someone, we almost invariably lash out at someone else? What if he, Jesus, to expose all this, becomes himself the last scapegoat! What if he himself were to be the final “sacrifice for sin”! This would be it! The last word on it! Maybe, just maybe, people could then see why in a land on the edge of open revolt, he welcomes the centurions of Rome into his circle! So that there would be no scapegoats in his kingdom. None. Except for him.

And all the time, he's crying out to his people, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace." But now what if he takes upon himself the fate of his own nation, his own people!ⁱⁱ What if he offers to go ahead of his people to take upon himself the wrath and violence of Rome! What if he died the death that awaited them in hope that they might never have to, that they might, just might, understand the ways of peace and love which he had taught and lived now down to his last excruciating breath! Maybe, just maybe, one day they will see that he was doing this so that there would be no more sacrifice for sin, no scapegoats, an end to the violence – people finally learning to live a life of love.

What if one day people realized that he was offering to do this not just for Israel but for all people everywhere, for the whole world! And so he says to people everywhere, to me, to you, to maniacal tyrants like Bashar al-Assad, to governments everywhere, including our own, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace."

ⁱ These thoughts indebted to René Girard.

ⁱⁱ Indebted to N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*.

– Dale Pauls