

Homily for Good Friday 2010

In about the year 30 – just two decades shy of two millennia ago – a man was tortured to death by his government, with the approval of the religious leadership and of most ordinary citizens who knew anything about it.

Except for one thing, this would be entirely unremarkable: countless people have been tortured to death in probably every one of those two thousand years from that time until today. The one thing that makes this death remarkable is that it has not been forgotten, and has in fact been remembered as unveiling the deepest truth about history.

This “Jesus of Nazareth” was understood by the government and by the powerful people of his time as a threat to their continuing power. To himself and to his friends and followers, he was announcing and beginning something better than what the ruling powers had on offer – but to those who liked what they now possessed, he put all that they cherished at risk. And so, as powerful-yet-fearful people have always done and continue to do, they eliminated him in the way they knew best: disgrace him, mock his message, and kill him. They trusted that history would forget him, his message, and his threatening possibility.

Except that, unlike so many other people executed as threats to the powers of this world, he hasn’t been forgotten. Every year on this Good Friday, all over the world, people come to remember a hope: That God was not, and is not, on the side of the powerful but stands with the poor, the exile, the different one, the strange one – and that the judgment of history in the longest run is that God’s way ultimately triumphs. The Roman Empire that executed Jesus outlived him – but lives now only in the history books, while we honor Him here today. The religious establishment that concurred in his killing was wiped out within a few generations. And the ordinary citizens who thought that the government and the religious leaders were protecting them? They were left adrift as the once-powerful elites tried unsuccessfully to save themselves.

What are we to make of this today? We are here to remember the powerless pacifist who preached and lived trust in the stranger and welcome to the outcast, who offered companionship to those whom society judged outrageous, who forgave and even loved wrongdoers instead of condemning them, who invited to his table all without restriction. We remember him because some part of us would like to trust in his message that a mysterious, hidden, but compassionate God is on the side of the powerless and the outcast; and that if on the contrary we align ourselves with the powerful, the “winners,” the “conventional wisdom” of any time or place, we will all-too-easily and most likely wind up fighting against God.

The drama of Jesus of Nazareth up against the empire, the religious institutions, and the common sense of his day lights up choices we see being made in our own time. Leaders in our own nation, gripped and moved by their and our own fears after 9/11, opened the door again to torture of alleged enemies – a door that had been shut for centuries by revulsion and

by a growing respect for human life and human dignity. But that door could not stay closed in the face of people's fears and leaders' opportunism. Church leaders, fearful of losing people's respect for the clergy, hid and moved and protected abusive priests – possibly for the best of motives as they saw things, but with no notice of the little ones, the victims; and again the powerful protected and still protect themselves at the expense of those they didn't seem to think deserved to count. In the recent financial collapse wealthy financiers had their livelihoods and businesses salvaged by our government while countless hardworking people lost jobs and homes. The already-rich got bailouts; the rest got rhetoric.

The drama of Jesus of Nazareth which we remember today is worthless if it is only an exercise in nostalgia or of personal piety. Jesus' torture and execution were, we believe, the path to our salvation – salvation first from the complacency that could blind us to the ways of power with the powerless, and from an unthinking allegiance to the powers that we falsely believe will protect us from our fears. We gather today to remember that we are no different, at root, from the good people of the crowds who gathered to heap praise on their Roman leaders; and to shout for the head of Jesus, the friend of outcasts, whom they had been told was such a threat to their way of life.

The drama of Jesus of Nazareth, his torture and public execution imagined as a good and necessary thing by those who hoped to be rid of him and of his threatening message, is a warning for us: We, today, can easily hope in the wrong things, the wrong ideas, the wrong convictions, the wrong powers, the wrong path to wellbeing: and being wrong about these things can destroy us, destroy those we love, destroy innocent strangers, even destroy hope. The worship of power as a guard against fear has been the way of the world in every generation, and only memory of this dangerous drama can save us from repeating the holocausts, the dirty wars, the cover-ups, the torture-chambers, the firebombings that fill the history books. We have to embrace another way, one that is difficult even to imagine, since our minds are filled with the fears and false assurances that our culture, like every culture, feeds us daily.

And we see daily the damage that the worship of power brings: bullying at school; an economic system that helps the rich and harms the poor; international competition for military advantage; and the destruction of hope for a fairer and better world. We see, but do we understand?

We come here to enact a dangerous memory: That the God who ultimately rules history is found among the outsiders, those who are considered worthy only of being forgotten or exploited or, if inconvenient to the powers, disposed of. The salvation of the human race from barbarism and even from self-extinction rests, we trust, on preserving this memory, on learning from it, and on seeing our own situation in its light. To come here – to honor the cross of Christ as we are about to do – is to stand with every outsider who is at the seeming mercy of a merciless power, to distance ourselves from every crowd, and to think and act with that particular outsider who preached and

lived a welcome to everyone, especially those whom society held to be of no account.

We claim, in honoring Christ's cross, to know what the empire, the religious guides, and the crowds did not know and do not know: That God is not found at the centers of power, but at the margins. Our procession to the cross commits us join our God there.