

Matthew 27:1-2, 11-66: Trial, Crucifixion, Burial

Preface:

If earlier in the week you had pulled me aside and said, gently, “Hey Rich, you might have bitten off more than you can chew with today’s passage.” I’d have looked you in the eyes and say, “Yeah. Totally.”

I did. To talk about Jesus’ political trial, his crucifixion, and his burial all in one message is just...ridiculous. It’s ridiculous. I don’t know what I was thinking when I planned this, except that I probably was concerned this walk through Matthew would stretch into, like, 2 years if we didn’t just hustle a little, you know?

So. Here we are.

Introduction:

And where we are is Jesus’ murder. Like all murders, it’s surrounded by people who have reasons for their choices, and can act on them. We’ll think about how we often read this passage, or are encouraged by church, by Christian pop-culture, to read this passage. I’ll suggest there’s more at stake here than we usually consider there is.

I think all this will be worth our while, and if not...well,

we'll have Easter again soon enough, like we've had Easter in the past, and we'll again talk about what we discover in these last hours of Jesus' life. We serve a God of multiple chances.

For now, let's pray that God uses this moment as much as he uses the others to shape us.

Prayer:

Sentimentalizing:

Let's start with something that I think is, by and large, unhelpful. And it's the way we read today's passage, or are taught to read it.

We read this, and we sentimentalize it. We personalize it. What I mean is this: We've been taught and trained to read Jesus' trial, his death, his burial in deeply personal ways, read ourselves at the center of this story. "Wasn't Jesus' death terrible?" We're asked. And we agree, "Yeah." "Well: Your sin put him up there."

Oh. Okay! "Wasn't Jesus alone at the end?" "Yeah, he was." "Well...it's your fault. You abandoned him when you sinned." "Don't you feel compassion on this one

toward whom no one showed compassion? Aren't you moved to give your life over to this person who died for you?"

It's not a terrible reading. I mean, it has its benefits, you know? If you're someone who, by and large, believes they've never done anything wrong, realizing that sin always has a cost, even if it was a cost 2,000 years ago, could be helpful. It could drive you to repentance. Picturing Jesus as someone who traded places with you, and then driving home how bad a trade it was on his end, can really motivate someone to gratitude.

But I wonder if reading the passage this way, and coming to expect that this is the way we're supposed to read this passage actually sets us up for something pretty terrible.

Neglecting Things:

If we read this only in this sentimentalized, personalized way, we neglect the larger systemic issues in play. We neglect the drama of the scene, the way God is in the background, the way Pilate is caving to politics, the way the Chief Priests and elders of God's People are legitimizing murder.

We neglect power, and how it's used, abused, respected.

And we neglect just how *typical* all this was. The only unusual thing happening here is that Pilate intended to free someone from their death penalty, and even then, that happened annually. But the crucifixion, the jeers, the public shame, the abandonment, it was all...regular stuff. Just like you and I might ignore the latest death penalty news, because deaths are doled out by the state all the time, this wasn't intrusive.

You know how you go away for a week, for vacation, for some work trip, for a family matter, or you're sick in the hospital or at home, and for you so much has happened, the week's been so full, and yet, we come back to each other again on Sunday, say, and for most of your brothers and sisters in Christ it's just been a week. Daily hassles, ups and downs, highs and lows, but all in the context of a regular rhythm of life. For Jesus and those around him, this was a special week, of course; Passover, first of all, and all the rest, but really, what's one more death, you know? What's happening to Jesus in today's scene is the regular rhythm of Jerusalem. It's just typical.

Our first lesson in today's scene is that the most mundane events, most regular tragedies, can have enormous, shocking positive impact if God or God's people lift them up in a special way.

Trivializing Jesus' Work?

And this may seem upside-down, but I think when we ignore how typical this is, it actually trivializes it. Makes it less significant. I think when we ignore how typical what happens to Jesus is, that's when we're in danger of trivializing it. It's when we're goaded into an emotional response--goaded into feeling guilty, goaded into owning what was Jesus' pain as our own--that we're most set-up to trivialize what happened here.

Because Jesus doesn't just die for you or me in today's scene, he dies for everyone, and all of us. He doesn't just condemn your personal sin, he condemns sin itself. And the effects of today's passage aren't just that individual slaves or free people, individual Judeans or Gentiles, can avoid being bad people, or feel better that their own relationship with God has been restored, it's that all people come together, and the divisions that break down humanity into an us and

them are overwritten by the truth that “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for [we] are all one in Christ Jesus.”

See, if we neglect that in these few hours great big powers are in play, and all we focus on is our own feelings about what happened to Jesus, then we will see the basic point of our faith-keeping as living morally, as we, ourselves, doing good if we're able. But as I've mentioned before, sin is not simply personal, it is systemic. Sin is alive not just in our hearts, exhibited in our actions, but it is active in the ways we order life, the systems, the laws, the institutions that we sinful people have created. So, you know, take, umm, prostitution: What we've done in America, consistently, is jail prostitutes. What we haven't done is recognize that most people--typically women, but only typically--enter prostitution around ages 12 or 13, forced their by pimps who control them in something that looks exactly like extortion and slavery, and have lived lives of multiple kinds of abuse before that even happens. So we make victims into prisoners, and then, with their records, make them impossible to employ, easy to be tracked down by their slave-holders who have often forcefully addicted

them to drugs, and slap the johns, who buy their bodies for awhile, with misdemeanors. We create a system in which sinner--buyers & slave-holders--are rewarded, while the victims of sin who have almost no personal agency, are punished. And then, when we hear about someone who has escaped prostitution, or this form of slavery, instead of allowing that to drive us to question why we don't change systems like this, we just celebrate their, oh, moral fortitude, you know? Their personal character, usually their trust in God. We create stories of how impressive God can be in an individual's personal restoration. And we should celebrate this. But it too often ends there, and in fact, becomes an excuse to blame more victims whose stories are unremarkable and tragic. We let the system continue, and if anything, label those who care about ending it too political or liberal or driven. If they are women, we label their assertive, heroic nature, oriented toward ending this in the name of Jesus with worse epithets, because our understandings--our system of organizing the world--assumes strong women are not normal, are aberrant, a view that feeds back into a willingness to see those who do hire prostitutes, and so continue the sinful system of sex slavery, as simply "weak," rather than agents of death.

What's this have to do with Jesus' death?

Everything. Everything.

Our Christianity is too small. It is meant to run out of our hearts, a living water, that floods the world around us. Instead, we keep it in, and practice lives of personal virtue, unaware that if we do not live for our society's good, we don't live up to Jesus.

See, it wasn't just bad people who killed Jesus, people who he died for. It was a bad society, bad powers that be, bad institutions that killed Jesus. He chose victimhood so we who follow him can end systems and institutions that create victims.

An Opened Holy of Holies:

When we read, today, that at Jesus' death cry, "the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom," we're being told that Jesus' death didn't just provide an opportunity for sinful individuals to have their sins forgiven, the Holy Spirit make a home in them, and live a moral life for Christ. We're being told that access to God has been, oh, open-sourced, it's been given out to everyone. Or maybe, say, Jesus has

a license-key for everyone who wants access to God. Before, you could only have it if you were Jewish. It was for Israelites only. The entire world had been locked into a system in which there were those who could know God, and everyone else. When the Temple's curtain is torn into two, and the Holy of Holies is opened up, we're meant to see that the most fundamental division in humanity--God's People and everyone else--has been torn up, too. If that system had been corrupted by sin, made to be an exclusionary destructive force of death in the world, then how much more all the other societies, cultures, systems, and institutions--religious or otherwise--that we people can't help but build.

The Church is meant to be rebuilders of the world. Individually, we depend on all the resources God gives us, natural and supernatural, holy and mundane, to approximate Christ's character, ever-closer to perfection. That means all sorts of stuff: positively, we live like and for Jesus, negatively, we call out sin and reject divisive evils. But we're also meant to remodel the world's institutions, systems, cultures in ways that approximate the character of God, too, getting as close as we can to making these things promoters of faith, hope, and love as Jesus embodies them. One day

history will break, and Jesus will return, but it'd be nice when he does if he says to us, "You have used your role as privileged citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven to help shape the world into one that's more like Heaven, and now that my Kingdom has fully come on Earth, be blessed in it."

What I can't personally allow is if Jesus, at his return, says to me, "You were a pastor! Why did your congregation think their whole job was to just be nice and let the world go to Hell? Didn't you notice the temple's curtain was torn?"

We've become the Holy of Holies and we are not locked away, but salted out to season and preserve the world, and the way it runs--the laws, the systems, the cultures, all of it--until Jesus returns and finishes what we have started.

Strange Things:

And we see, right after Jesus' death, strange things happening. Death itself is interrupted, as Matthew gives us a unique story about the Resurrection flaring out, just for a moment, and some people coming back to life to eventually die again, or perhaps ascend with Christ to help prepare for the world to come. Who knows. It's weird, an outlier. We see a Centurion, a

Roman Soldier, one of the ones the Chief Priests and Pilate feared, giving voice to Jesus' status as God's Son. We're reminded that it's women who didn't run away, and they've not only been around all along, but they've been paying the bills so Jesus and his disciples can do what they've been doing. A rich man, who we know from other places was also a member of the Sanhedrin, the Temple-based priestly class--so, doubly a bad egg, you know? By Matthew's standards. He uses his riches for Jesus' sake, and makes his own tomb unclean.

And we see, as we haven't seen before: Gender roles and norms are broken. Ethnic and racial tensions are broken. Dynamics of oppressor and oppressed are broken. The religious enemy is revealed as an agent of good. Wealth is used well. Death itself is broken. These individual examples aren't chosen because these individuals showed personal, moral virtue, integrity. They're lifted up because of the way that the institutions and systems of the world, that these individuals were so deeply a part of.

Seeds of Change:

Their displays of moral character give a promise to the idea that in what's to come, in a short while after the Spirit falls, any individual can break free from the mold that culture, law, economics, religion, even a death-driven world, places them in, and be something different, be something for God. These individuals

become the seeds by which the very systems of the world are redeemed and become even agents of redemption, just as we individuals become agents of redemption.

Christians have begun to engage with the issue of prostitution, you know? They've fought to make laws that don't punish slave girls, but instead force the men who rent their private parts to own their role in a system that dehumanizes them all. Hundreds of organizations have sprung up, even in Central Ohio, to fight what's called human trafficking, but is slavery, just not the racial kind that soaked and stained our country's start, which was even then sexual in nature as often as anything else. And it has been Christians who have launched these redemption efforts, and who have sustained them, fighting for a change in society, so much so, that we can drop, in lots of circles, the phrase "human trafficking," and all agree it's bad. We can see a prostitute as not unclean, but as a victim of systems that have taken away his or her power and will. When Bo's my age, she'll just accept that view of things as normal, as regular, because Christians have been and will continue to work to end the institution of human trafficking, the system of laws that enabled it, and, I hope, the economics of poverty and addiction that so often start it. And it's not because those system-breaking culture-challenging Christians are saints, you know? Moral, virtuous Mother Theresas. It's because they saw a broken system, a broken way of

doing things, and sought to change it.

They realized the seed hope that these characters who show up after Jesus' death reveal: That someday we will join in singing "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever." And because of it, those kingdoms, principalities, and powers, those systems and institutions and laws, can be changed now by the same power that brought Jesus back to life. Which we'll read about soon.

Conclusion:

Today, though, I'd ask this: Next time you end up here, in Good Friday territory, notice that it's not just about how much God loves you. It's about how much God loves everyone, loves even the world that we live in, loves cultures and institutions and kingdoms and states and laws, it's about how God wants all human things, all the things we do and create and the norms that we live with, to be more faithful, and hopeful, and loving--more, in short, like his Son.

And we privileged citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, children of the God Most High, we've been set here for these things, given the Spirit, each other, Scripture, to remodel the world until Jesus asserts holiness over it all at his return.

So be good; don't do bad. A myriad of poor choices put

Jesus into that tomb, people who's mothers would have asserted were really "good at heart" but who failed by giving into the sinful flow of the world around them as well as their own sinful inclinations. Let's be good, with Christ our standard, you know? But let's recognize, we are not without the context of culture, institution, law, and these things are not holy, nor did they drop from Heaven. Most often in history they've existed in the service of protecting the power of those who could have their power protected, through cash or violence or influence or whatever. No thing, no set of laws or customs or institution is without some moral-bent, toward Hell or Heaven.

But Jesus and his people give up our power so others might have it, and make sure the way the world works does the same thing more and more often for more and more people until he returns. Let's not just be good, and do good, but recognize we've been salted into the world to make it good, too, for everyone.