



PUBLICATIONS--Manna: Food for the Journey of Spirituality

Articles

Holy Week: Reflections on Good Friday

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Then [Jesus] called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Mark 8:34, NIV)

"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." (Gal. 2:20, NIV)

Today is Palm Sunday, according to the ancient calendar of historical Christianity. That means that Easter is only one week away. Easter is a day that many look forward to as the most important day in the Christian calendar. Easter marks the day on which the Lord Jesus Christ rose from the dead, and in so doing, guaranteed eternal life for us, his followers.

Yet before he rose from the grave, our Lord Jesus willingly underwent the incredible, horrific agony of crucifixion. This is the part of the Easter story that we too easily overlook. Sadly, many churches today do not hold services on Good Friday (though some do). While we are quick to respond that "he is risen," the resurrection is NOT the event that Jesus himself asked us to remember him by. To be sure, the apostle Paul tells us that on the night of the Last Supper, Jesus commanded us to memorialize his *death*, not his resurrection (1 Cor. 11:23-26). Jesus taught us that the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper were to commemorate his body and blood, which within hours, he would sacrifice for us on the cross (Luke 22:17-20).

Not only did our Lord command us to memorialize his death, he also commanded us, his disciples, to take up our crosses and follow him. In first-century Palestine, the sight of a convicted criminal carrying his own cross to the place of execution was not uncommon; nevertheless, crucifixion was an abhorrent sight to the Jews, who lived under the oppression of Rome. Yet this hated, disgusting ritual was one Jesus chose to represent the life of discipleship. As Holy Week begins, perhaps we might reflect upon what Christ meant when he commanded us to take up our crosses and follow him.

During most of the 1990s, I was a family therapist in a large evangelical church. On the wall in my office, prominently displayed so that clients could readily see it, was a crucifix--that is, the cross of Christ with the corpus (body) attached to it. Mine was probably the only office in an evangelical church anywhere that had a crucifix on the wall! In Protestant churches, and those that later grew out of the various Protestant traditions, the cross is usually displayed without the body to proclaim the good news that "he is risen." There was a specific reason, however, that I

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kept a crucifix, rather than an empty cross, on my office wall. Most persons who enter counseling do so because they are unhappy or something is wrong in their lives. Invariably, they want to be happier or to find a solution to the problem that brings them to the therapist's office. What many failed to realize, however, was that to reach their goal of greater happiness, joy, and contentment, they would have to undergo a major psychological/spiritual transformation. Often, I would say, "In order to get where you want to go, you have to do *that* first," pointing to the crucifix hanging prominently on my wall. Naturally, most would ask what I meant. I would tell them, echoing the words of Jesus, that if they wanted to find their lives, they would have to lose them first. "In other words," I would say, "If you want to live life to the full, you have to die first."

The apostle Paul was one who had taken up his cross to follow Christ. He wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). Moreover, Paul told us that he had learned the secret of contentment in any and all circumstances (Phil. 4:11-13). For Paul, there was no difference in wealth or poverty, health or sickness, feast or famine, good times or bad. This is not to say that he had no preference for one over the other--he would not be human if that were the case! Yet Paul had surrendered his will and his life to God. He had been crucified with Christ and he no longer lived. He had transcended the tension of opposites that plagues most of us, who are torn between life as it is and life as we want it to be.

As Good Friday, approaches, perhaps we can ask ourselves if we have been crucified with Christ. In order to illustrate this principle more clearly, I would like to quote from my book *Ashes into Gold: The Journey of Spirituality*:

We garner further insight into Paul's secret to contentment and non-demanding detachment by examining an enigmatic statement he wrote in a letter to the church at Galatia. Paul said, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live" (Gal. 2:20a). When Paul says "I" have been crucified, he refers to the death of his selfish, demanding ego. . . .

In our natural state, there is within each of us a sinful nature that is hostile to the divine will and in active rebellion against God (Rom. 8:5-8; Gal. 5:17). Our sinful nature may be represented as an infantile, selfish despot that tolerates no frustration, brooks no delay of gratification, and reverences no master—including God. Sigmund Freud descriptively labeled this inner highchair tyrant "his majesty the baby," the metaphorical embodiment of our innate egocentricity, grandiosity, and false sense of omnipotence. His majesty's latent cries resound within each of us as he pounds his spoon upon his highchair and screams, "I want! I want! I want!" In his boundless egocentricity, his majesty the baby views himself as the center of a personally constructed universe. He regards himself as

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the principal actor in the unfolding drama of life and all others as mere extras who exist solely to support him in his starring role. He is completely narcissistic. Both selfish and unloving, his pretensions of love are highly conditional and demanding. He is forever complaining, never satisfied, and always manipulating others to get what he wants.

His majesty the baby is responsible for our obsessions with money, possessions, relationships, power, and the other idols of our culture. His desire for material goods is insatiable; his thirst for power and control is unassuageable; and his unparalleled narcissism is responsible for the selfish expectations that characterize many relationships. Everyone is plagued by this inner despot or tyrannical king, and his presence is especially evident in the need for control, inability to tolerate frustration, and narcissistic demands that characterize our attitudes and feelings.

His majesty the baby tolerates no competitors for his regal throne, not even God. In fact, the fundamental and most tragic flaw of this infantile egocentricity is the pervasive human desire to be god in the place of God. We have all, at varying times, succumbed to the pervasive human desire to banish God from the throne of heaven and reign in place of the divine. . . .

To be sure, the omnipotent ego—what we have called "his majesty the baby"—abdicates the throne only after a sufficient degree of pain. Then a new ruler may ascend the throne in our lives. . . . The mark of conversion in the Christian faith is the confession that 'Jesus is Lord.' That means that there is a new occupant on the throne.

Before Jesus may be enthroned in our lives, however, a death must occur: the old king, his majesty the baby, must die. It is a spiritual principle that death precedes life. We see this principle enacted in nature: a seed must be buried in the ground before new life springs from it. Therefore, as surely as winter comes before spring, the old selfish, incessantly demanding ego must die before we can walk in newness of life. Jesus said, "[W]hoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 10:39). In terms of the Christian drama, the cross precedes the resurrection.

One of Hollywood's greatest portrayals of the universal drama of death before life was the movie *Dances with Wolves*. Near the beginning of that film, the wounded Union soldier (played by Kevin Costner) mounts a horse and gallops alone toward the enemy troops. In what appears to be a suicide attempt, Costner's character repeatedly rides the length of the enemy line, allowing the Confederate soldiers to take potshots at him.

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Finally, in a particularly moving slow-motion scene, the hero releases the reins of his galloping horse and extends his arms wide, apparently welcoming imminent death. Leaning back in the saddle, eyes closed, arms extended wide, he resembles a man crucified on a cross. He is not killed, however, as his troops, in response to his desperate act, rally and attack.

The soldier's deed is viewed as a heroic act by his superiors, and he is offered the post of his choosing. His daring act—the total surrender of his own life and symbolic crucifixion under fire—is the vehicle by which he finds a new life among the Plains Indians. It is also the means by which he finds himself. For the Christian, the lesson is plain: we must be willing to let go of the life we had planned in order to receive the life that God has planned for us. Or, as Jesus so succinctly put it, "[W]hoever loses his life for me will find it" (Matt. 16:25).

Let us now continue Paul's enigmatic statement to the Galatians:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal. 2:20)

Paul's selfish, demanding ego had died; it had been "crucified with Christ." Then he added, "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." We see, then, that the purpose of his renunciation of self was to allow Christ to take its place. Self had died, and the Lord Jesus now lived and ruled in Paul. The apostle was then able to participate joyfully even amidst the sorrows of life because ego was no longer his center of reference; Christ was. (*Ashes into Gold: The Journey of Spirituality*, pp. 119-123)

As Good Friday approaches, let us ask ourselves if, like the apostle Paul, we are crucified with Christ. Or is the selfish, demanding ego still in charge? If we insist on having our own way, we haven't died. If we seek the approval of our peers, or need to be seen in a particular way, we haven't died. If we make demands of our loved ones, or put our wants ahead of their needs, we haven't died. If we are driven by ambition or demand the fulfillment of our favorite wishes, we haven't died. If we cling to money and material possessions, or strive for power and control over others, we haven't died. If we feverishly pursue the accumulation of wealth, or are unhappy for the lack of money, we haven't died. If we demand a certain position, or refuse to do menial tasks, we haven't died. If we resent the good fortune of others, and are envious because it didn't happen to us, we haven't died. If we require others to make us happy or to take care of us, we haven't died.

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If we use others for self-gratification in any form, we haven't died. To borrow the words of George MacDonald, if self is still the ruling, determining, or originating element within us (rather than Christ), we haven't died.

To be sure, the death of the old self and our resurrection to new life is both a one-time event (at conversion) and also an ongoing process. The Easter drama of crucifixion followed by resurrection to new life is an ongoing one. We must put to death the old, selfish, sinful nature every day, one day at a time. Like the apostle Paul, we must die every day (1 Cor. 15:31).

As Good Friday approaches, let us remind ourselves that, as disciples of Jesus Christ, we too are to take up our crosses daily and follow our Lord to the place of psychological/spiritual crucifixion. As Jesus becomes more and more our center of reference—and self less and less so—we will find that our lives are increasingly characterized by the peace, joy, and contentment that God has always desired for us.

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