

Palm Sunday - April 5, 2009
St. David's

They told him to stop before another bomb went off. But The Rev. John Cross could not. He kept digging through the rubble of what was his parish, looking for more people. There, in the middle of what used to be the Sunday school, he picked up a blood stained sheet of paper with the prayer from that morning's class. "Dear God, we are sorry for the times we were so unkind." That was the last prayer of four children killed by a bomb thrown into their church. It was thrown by people who feared losing their power...people who were willing to kill innocent children so that they could continue to hold the upper hand in that society.

I, like I am sure most of you, have heard today's wrenching Passion Gospel as a once for all time event. Neo-orthodox Christian theology teaches us that the Passion of Jesus is a unique occurrence in the history of the world, incomparable with any other moment of history.

It is absolutely true that the story we just struggled through, did change the world forever. But I would argue that it is far from unique. It, unfortunately, is the same old story. Tragically, it happens all the time. It happened to those four Sunday School children in 1963 at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Atlanta. It happened to the leader of that Civil Rights movement 41 years ago yesterday. It happened to a priest named Oscar Romero, shot to death while standing at the altar at a church in San Salvador in 1980, after he had preached a sermon the day before calling on soldiers to disobey orders that violated human rights. It happened on a scale beyond comprehension in Germany in the 1940's. It happened again in Rwanda where an

estimated 800,000 people were killed in the span of 100 days in 1994. And it is happening again right now in Darfur.

Jesus was killed for the same reason all of those people were killed. He threatened the status quo. He made the rash suggestion that a few people should not have tyrannical power over everyone else. He critiqued a system where only the elite had easy access to food, clothing and shelter. Jesus was killed in a power struggle, the struggle between the haves and have nots. Jesus was killed because he envisioned a world very different than any the world had known before, a place he called the kingdom of God.

Most likely, that is what was going on in the parade we enacted outside. On the other side of town, a gigantic imperial, military procession was ushering in Governor Pontius Pilate, with all pomp and ceremony. Our procession, the one on the wrong side of the tracks, was a tiny group of nobodies, ushering into Jerusalem a guy named Jesus by waving a bunch of rotting palm leaves they picked up off the desert floor. Instead of a stallion, Jesus comes in on a broken down mule. It was one last symbolic attack by Jesus on an empire that wielded their power over the masses. The death of Jesus is not only not unique, it is the oldest tale known to humankind. Mess with the domination system, and you going to be in a heap of trouble.

That's not the only thing that bothers me about the way we have most often told the story of Palm/Passion Sunday. Now, be honest, were any of you a bit miffed at me a few minutes ago when your only part in the Passion Gospel was to play the crowd, the riotous crowd, that yells, "CRUCIFY HIM!" All of us know, of course, that we would

not be doing that, if we were there. Right? But, when we realize that the story of Jesus is not unique at all, but rather something that happens in every generation, it sheds a new light on what we might have done if we had been there in the first century.

Because the truth is, there we sat, as 800,000 people were killed in Rwanda. And here we sit all over again as similar numbers are killed in Darfur.

When we view the death of Jesus as a once for all time event 2000 years ago, this is the risk we take. It's really easy to look back and say we would not have been swept up in the mob mentality of that day. But when we realize that we are in a similar drama and we have responded to it by saying things like, "it's just all out of our control" and "What can one person do about these things?", or "We have no power in this situation," maybe it is a little easier to have compassion on all those disciples who fall asleep on, and abandon Jesus today.

So what can one person do in the face of all the injustice and oppression we continue to face in our world on a daily basis? Is it even possible to not be like the disciples in today's story of the Passion and death of Jesus? How do we not succumb to the fear of being squashed by our world's domination systems?

We look a little deeper. A closer examination of the Passion story reveals that not everyone fails and abandons Jesus. There are a few who overcome their fear. The first one is at the beginning of the story. She is the woman who takes that alabaster jar of Imperial Majesty perfume, which sells today at \$215,000 a bottle, and pours the whole thing over Jesus's head. The men in the story completely miss the point, suggesting that the money should have been spent on the poor. What they are missing

is that Jesus is the great defender of the poor. He is the one that has finally stood up for the poor. What this woman is doing is the only thing she can do to honor the person who has dignified the lives of so many people. She is symbolically heaping abundance on those in need, just as Jesus taught. She is, in her own way, breaking down the domination system that left people without. Jesus makes it clear that in this act, this anonymous woman has understood why Jesus is about to be killed better than all the men, and she has done something about it. He tells us that “she has done what she could” and because of that she will be remembered for this action in the same way that people will remember Jesus when breaking bread and drinking wine.

Then at the very end of the Passion, we have the lurkers, the woman standing in the background, who refuse to abandon Jesus, when all the male disciples are long gone. Only a few are named, but there are many there. Like the woman at the beginning of the story, they too will anoint Jesus’s body, after a man with some influence, Joseph of Arimathea, is allowed to take the body.

As usual, it is the women that get it. Jesus was the one with no power, but he changed the world anyway. He brought about, at least for a fleeting moment, the kingdom of God on earth. He did so by never giving in to the power brokers, by never fighting the pain they imposed on him by imposing pain on anyone himself. In the same way these women, the ones that aren’t even allowed to be close to the scene, use their lack of power to make a difference in the world.

Here then is our calling. In the face of the impossible in our lives, we are called to do what is possible. In situations where events are totally out of our control, we do

what is in our control. Perhaps it does not seem like much, but it is enough. These women do all they can do, though they have no power. And it is enough that the idea of Christianity lives today. That's all God asks of us. Do what we can do. Let us never abandon what Jesus taught us. Let us envision our lack of power not as an impediment to change things, but as the road we must travel to bring about Jesus's vision of the kingdom of God. Amen.