

A PRE-LENTEN PRIMER

One of the reasons we must become as little children to enter the Kingdom is because children are curious. If you show a child a picture of Jesus hanging from the Cross and if this child has not been confronted with this event before, he or she will be disturbed and upset that such things can happen to someone in this world. The child will be full of questions. Why did people do this to this man? What had he done to make them do this?

Most children will have a hard time understanding your answers to such questions. They did this to him because he loved God above all else. They did this to him because he went about helping people and healing them of their diseases. They did this to him because he told them about loving each other, and about how they could live and love forever. They did this to him because he tried to get them to believe that God loved them more than they loved themselves.

Such answers may make sense to some of us, but most children will not understand them. I secretly suspect that many of *us* do not understand such things very clearly either. Somewhere along the way, our questions get smothered under layers of creeds and rituals and assumptions – until we no longer ask them. And that works pretty well for thousands of people. But it is hard to comprehend what happened to Jesus on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. That may be partly why only a handful of us show up at such services. This Pre-Lenten Primer is an attempt to look at such things before the emotions of our celebrations and our worship draw us into more important things.

The word that represents the thinking that leads to His death comes from the High Priest, Caiaphas: *“It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish.”*

Why is it *expedient* for a man like Jesus to die? Was He really such a serious threat? How could one man so use His short life that He was a great danger to the fate of the people – to the very life of the nation? How had Jesus become Public Enemy Number One?

Of course, like most people, I want the easy answer: It was a tragic mistake. Jesus was not a serious threat. Jesus was a good and loving man. They should never have killed Him. But that is the wrong

answer. Jesus was the threat that Caiaphas and other Jewish leaders were seeing – just not in the way they were seeing it. If Jesus had not been stopped, He would have transformed the Jewish nation – and far more than any of them realized. The Kingdom of God is not the same as the kingdoms of men. The threat was real and serious, and it still is today.

From a human, worldly perspective, what was at stake?

It was *expedient* for Rome. Jesus was charged with treason; He had become a threat to Roman rule. If He was the rightful King, then Caesar was not.

It was *expedient* for the Jewish leaders. Jesus was charged with blasphemy against Jewish religion. He had become a threat to the authority of the leaders over the people – a threat to their power and to their positions as the religious leaders of their time. If the rightful King had come, then their authority was no longer valid.

It was *expedient* for the common people. Jesus was “stirring them up” – making them wonder and question and think about their lives and the manner of their living. They might be led astray, either into open conflict with Roman authority or into conflict with the authority and structures of Jewish society.

It was *expedient* for Jesus to die because He took the authority of God with utmost seriousness. That always calls into question all other authority. It is always expedient to destroy any individual who is not afraid to live for God. Such a person always seems to be a symbol of anarchy. And if that individual affects many others and claims an authority higher than that of the existing systems, then he must be silenced one way or another. We have seen it many, many times. A whole generation of Jesus’ early followers died as martyrs. We have seen it with Martin Luther and Martin Luther King, Jr. We have seen it with Socrates and Abraham Lincoln. And most of us know less famous illustrations of people who fit the pattern along with the famous (e.g., Jonathan Edwards, Anne Hutchinson, Frank Weiskel).

It is expedient – inevitably and unalterably expedient – for one person to die if they do not worship Caesar or the authority of Caesar. And it does not matter whether Caesar is Caesar or Hitler or Stalin, or the High Priest, the Pope, the “will of the people” in a democracy, or the boss you work for. To be sure, this gets confusing because

there are also rebellious people who disobey and disrupt our systems with no vision or purpose beyond their own self-centered anger or self-interest.

How is a nonpersonal system expected to distinguish between a mere nonconformist causing mayhem and an individual who is following a Higher Power? In either case, it is the nature of authority to silence anything that threatens its authority, and there is no civilization which does not rest on human authority of one kind or another.

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It is no accident that the prophets are killed or that the messengers of God are stoned. Only those who are impotent in their mission are spared. If you are a Christian, you are either saved by the power of God or you are spared by being so ineffective that no one can figure out what you believe in or what you live for.

Along with our other curiosities, have we ever wondered why Jesus knew so far ahead of time – ahead of the fact – that He would be killed? Some have simplex answers, like: Jesus was divine, so He knew everything. That kind of divinity kills all curiosity. But the real Jesus lived in the real world, and He knew that an individual cannot dispute the political power of the existing system unless he successfully overcomes that system with force. And since Jesus had rejected the use of physical force as a way appropriate to His purposes – and since He still felt called to dispute human authority in the name of God’s authority – He realized with greater and greater certainty that He would be killed.

His only alternative was to keep quiet. But if you are God’s Messiah, keeping quiet is not faithful. Out of Jesus’ understanding of the crossfire between human authority and God’s authority came teaching after teaching:

“Do not fear those who can kill the body”

“For whoever wants to save his life will lose it”

*“The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them
It shall not be so with you.”*

*“Blessed are the meek [those who submit to God
but not to men]”*

“If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth”

Teachings and parables and deeds poured from Him in rejection of the pull of earthly authority when it was in conflict with God’s authority. His formula was neither revolution nor acquiescence. *“My Kingdom is not of this world,”* He insisted. In the light of that Kingdom, Jesus lived His life and would not turn aside from it. The authorities of earth could do what they liked about it, which was inevitably to get rid of Him (or so they thought).

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I suppose most of us would say we are in favor of individual freedom. Where do we imagine this comes from? Do we think we have the right to demand it from the people around us or from the systems we live in? Are we convinced that government agents and agencies are greatly concerned about our individual freedom? No society and no political system can operate or exist without exerting some pressure and force upon the lives of its individuals. Does it surprise us that this was true in the Israel of Jesus’ time? If you want to be free, you have to claim your freedom and suffer the consequences. If you have to gain permission to be free from some place or some one, then by definition you are not free. Jesus knew this with incredible clarity. His whole ministry was an increasing power struggle between the earthly authorities all around Him and the authority of God which rang within him because He would not stop praying.

Maybe that sounds childishly clear to all of you (I hope it does), but what does not seem very clear anymore is that the meaning of freedom and the way to claim it was revealed to us on a Cross. Many of us simply turn away because it is too disturbing to contemplate. Some of us are still stupefied, wondering if we are really seeing what we are looking at. But the freedom to become children of God is not ours unless we claim it. True baptism still scares us mightily. Dying to the old life and being born anew into LIFE under the authority of the Holy Spirit – no one chooses that lightly.

So Jesus talks to us about a narrow gate, and we try to turn it into some little moralism about being politically correct or becoming more open-hearted.

By the way, the manner in which Jesus died has done more to impress the world with the worth – the sacred importance – of each individual and has done more to free more individuals than all the Magna Cartas, Bills of Rights, and Constitutions in the world put together. We are grateful for them; they outline and codify things now precious to us. But they are useless unless we have already followed Jesus into a WAY of Life that has already died to this world.

All the cultures and societies before Jesus, and lots of cultures and societies that have come after Him, have minimized the sacred importance of the individual. Oh yes, individuals are important if they make a significant contribution to the society around them. But Jesus thought that each individual's personal relationship with God was *eternally* significant and valuable. Parable after teaching highlights it. Go into God's presence alone, and keep part of it secret. Our prayers and our deeds are not important just because we show them off in front of others. God sees in secret. The Holy Spirit guides us one-on-one. We each have our own personal, individual assignments. The Good Samaritan is not a group. "*Inasmuch as you have done it unto one [not many – unto one] of the least of these ...*" There is more rejoicing in heaven over one lost sheep than over ninety-nine (even though ninety-nine is a bigger church).

In Eastern religions, individuals do not matter, except as they learn how to get off the wheel (of Samsara). Stop having any attachments. Melt into the great "sea" of Nirvana. In Western religions, we claim to know the worth of individuals, but we never fully believe it. If it is not relational and personal, it is not really Christian. It starts with baptism. You come out of the waters knowing you are not just one among many. YOU are the beloved son – YOU are the beloved daughter. And you leave behind you the life you tried to live before you knew the utter grace, the full forgiveness, the incomprehensible delight of your Creator's love and purpose and plans for you – from here to eternity.

To be sure, I have friends who sharply disagree with such exaltation of the importance of the individual and individual freedom. Individuality is the *problem*, they say; we all need to be more aware and more committed to the needs and desires of the community and the society around us. But they are talking about individuals who have not gone through "the change": who have not been "born anew" – who have not died to the old life and been raised into a new one. "*If you lose your life for my sake, you will find it,*" Jesus taught us.

But that is a whole different kind of individuality. If we watch Jesus or Paul or Augustine – or indeed a vast host of those who truly followed Jesus into a higher individuality – they are not self-centered, uncaring, or isolated from the drama going on all around them. But neither are they controlled by the human systems around them. Jesus really did lead us into a New and Higher WAY.

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So what do you think: Did Jesus die because He thought that would make us all be nice to each other? Did Jesus die because He thought it would solve the problems of poverty or hunger in a temporal world? Do you think the Cross was a finite solution to the problems of just one society at just one brief moment in history? When is it time for us to go get the kiss of LOVE from the Great Prince and wake up?

Everybody Jesus healed has now been dead for over two thousand years. Everybody who decided to follow Jesus and be a faithful disciple has now been dead for over two thousand years. When did we decide to make His death and Resurrection so minuscule and meaningless? He came to announce a Kingdom that has no end. We keep trying to cram it into little boxes so small that it's only about problems even *we* will not care about a few weeks or months from now.

I think Jesus died to invite individuals to trust God more than anything else in the entire world. Jesus died proclaiming a Kingdom that was for and about individuals far more important and valuable than any of us can yet believe. And yes, we need each other for support and understanding along the WAY. But only if we keep His Message clear and keep Him central to everything we are doing – and to everything we are enduring.

Are any of you thinking we have now strayed from the real story? When Jesus died, evil was up to its usual tricks. Nobody was guilty. The Roman system and the Jewish system were both involved, and neither one operated by its own rules. The Roman system killed Him as a favor to the Jewish system, which had reasons that the Roman system neither believed in nor cared about. The Jewish system said Rome killed Him as a traitor to Rome, which is hardly a crime in Jewish eyes, and which nobody believed, least of all Pilate the Roman. Evil always tries to confuse the issue. Evil always says, “He went that-a-way.” Only, Jesus had called evil’s bluff. He waited for the drama to work itself out – out in the open, where history could see it

ever afterward. That meant waiting to be arrested and waiting to be crucified. An expensive way to make a point. Sometimes truth and love get very expensive.

Even in those last moments in the Garden, Jesus still could have run. He wanted to, desperately. One last time, He checked with His Authority: the God of love and abundant LIFE, who was asking Him to lay down His. Jesus was not sure. Was there an alternative? He knew how puny the individual was against the power of the systems. Would it be clear enough? Would anybody remember or understand?

The pleading prayers went forth, but the orders did not change. Once in the hands of His enemies, Jesus was mostly silent. He allowed them to cook up the procedures and the rationale for killing Him and to work it out any way they wanted. But forever after, any person who cared about Life would have this Cross to ponder and wonder about:

Why did they kill such a man?

What was the motive?

Why did they hate Him so much?

Why the unusual and illegal procedures – why were
the systems willing to break all their own rules
to get the deed done?

What had He done, and why did He not run or fight?

Such questions unmask the source of evil – and the pathway to Eternal Life. In the context of this man and His life among us, they point the way to the most dynamic brand of personhood – to the unlimited potential of Life’s meaning and possibilities. Jesus offers to us a WAY of Life called “Trust in God” – “Obedience to the Holy Spirit.”

Meanwhile, I have a question of my own: How is it possible that some people know this story and do not love Him? That one I will never be able to understand.

But back to my own problems. Will anyone understand or remember? O dear God: let me be one of them.