

## Don't Look Away

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem, his journey entered a new and more dangerous chapter. His followers didn't realize that, of course. In that arid country, we can imagine a sunlit, sparkling day, happy crowds furiously waving palms, Jesus's donkey prancing merrily down a path strewn with cloaks, the disciples grinning in triumph, the air ringing with joyous shouts of "Hosannah!" Nobody knew what was going to happen – except for Jesus himself.

Today, we know exactly what happened. Jesus enjoyed a last Passover meal with his friends. Blame it on the wine or their youth – some of the disciples might have been as young as fifteen when Jesus called them – but they either didn't understand or couldn't accept what Jesus was telling them as he offered them a few final lessons before saying goodbye. When he went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray, they followed him but couldn't stay awake. Then Judas showed up with the temple police, and our Lord's long ordeal began.

Each of the Gospels describes Jesus's Passion a little differently. The temple authorities' complaints against Jesus differ somewhat from Gospel to Gospel. Herod doesn't always make an appearance. Pilate is more or less resistant to the idea of crucifying an innocent man, but these are minor details. No matter how carefully we compare the Gospels or how many different translations we use, they all tell the same tragic story of betrayal, violence, and murder. Judas is always a traitor, Peter always denies Jesus three times after swearing that he never will, Pilate always releases Barrabas and eventually agrees to crucify Jesus, and Jesus always, *always* ends up nailed to a cross, where he suffers for hours before he ultimately dies. His suffering and death are a priceless gift of divine love, freely given to redeem his Father's lost children. The benefits we obtained from Jesus's sacrifice make the Crucifixion one of the highest points in all of human history. But make no mistake – the Crucifixion of Jesus the Christ is also the very lowest point in

all of human history because it's the moment when humankind hit absolute rock bottom. The Son of God came to us as one of us, eager to share his love. He was fully divine and fully human, dressed in the form of a wise teacher and healer. He was smart, funny, compassionate, forgiving, generous with his miraculous powers, and patient when his followers couldn't quite keep up. He walked among us for over thirty years and devoted the last three years of his life to teaching us how we're supposed to live before sacrificing himself in our place. We repaid him by killing him in the most barbaric way possible. It doesn't get any worse than that.

There are no heroes in this story. Pilate's offer to "have [Jesus] flogged and release him" was nowhere near as merciful as he might have thought or as it might sound to us. A Roman flogging involved lashing a victim with a barbed whip designed to tear strips of flesh from the body until the victim was one step from death. Flogging was the standard punishment inflicted before crucifixion, so victims went to the cross weak from blood loss and dehydration. Although the Persians are thought to have invented crucifixion, it was the Romans who refined it into the most humiliating, agonizing, and ghastly form of capital punishment a rebel against the Empire could endure. Mel Gibson has drawn criticism for his violent depiction of Jesus's death in *The Passion of the Christ*, but the truth was probably much worse than what Gibson put on film. The guards and soldiers didn't hold back, nor did they exhibit the professional efficiency and dispassion that one might expect from those who routinely inflicted pain for a living. Jesus was badgered, taunted, mocked, brutalized, and humiliated by his captors. We can only wonder what had contaminated their souls to the point that they reveled in torturing helpless prisoners. That Jesus was crucified at all is appalling. That he was subjected to so much gratuitous cruelty in the hours before the Crucifixion is horrifying. That no one protected him from the worst of the violence inflicted upon him is a stain on humanity's collective soul.

For those of us with gentle hearts or weak stomachs, the story of Jesus's Passion can be overwhelming. When we read the Gospels, it's tempting to skip over the gruesome descriptions of the Crucifixion and go straight to Jesus's Resurrection and triumphant return. When watching a movie like *The Passion of the Christ*, it's hard to resist the impulse to close one's eyes or look away when the carnage becomes unbearable. But if we are to be the faithful disciples that Jesus wants, we have to resist that impulse and bear witness to his sufferings. He endured them, so we should, too. We cannot, we *must not*, look away.

My purpose here is not to embarrass anyone who gets lightheaded at the thought of bloodshed or to insist that we have to punish ourselves for our sins by contemplating what Jesus went through to free us from them. I'm not big on guilt-tripping my fellow Christians about their human failings – I have too many of my own to cast stones at anyone else. However, I believe that Jesus wanted to accomplish more than one thing as he hung from the cross. As our Redeemer, Jesus went through his ordeal to pay the price for all the sins of a fallen humanity. But Jesus was always a teacher, and he did not stop teaching when the scourge and nails bit into his body. I think Jesus wanted us to see just how sickening violence can be. I believe he hoped that his followers, seeing how he suffered, would reject violence and answer his call to show our fellow children of God more mercy than the power-mad authorities of that time showed him. We owe it to Jesus never to look away from the lesson he died to teach us.

I would love to pretend that Jesus's Crucifixion could only have happened in a first century nation held captive under the Roman Empire's boot. Honesty and history compel me to acknowledge otherwise. The specifics of how the principalities and powers of this world would attack a messiah who came to rescue humanity from their grip would undoubtedly vary from place to place and century to century. We don't crucify troublesome people anymore. But we

need only look at Darfur, Rwanda, Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Killing Fields of Cambodia, the Holocaust, the Trail of Tears, the transatlantic slave trade, and the various efforts to wipe out whole populations that are taking place around the world right now to know what happens whenever worldly power is exercised without mercy. Tragedies ensue, and unless Christ's followers do what we can to protect the victims, our Lord is effectively crucified all over again.

It's a blessing that Christians examine our souls during Lent and revisit Jesus's Passion during Holy Week. Each year, Jesus's tormentors force us to confront humanity's worst impulses. Our Lenten self-reflections reveal to each of us how low we can be tempted to go. It's hard, painful work to remember that you're just as capable as Judas of betraying someone you love, just as capable as Peter of compromising your ideals, just as capable as Caiaphas or Pilate of making monstrous decisions when the stakes seem high enough, maybe even as capable as the guards of torturing someone else when you're under too much pressure yourself. But there is good news. Once we're reminded of these shameful truths, we aren't abandoned to guilt and hopelessness. We're invited to repent, turning back to our God and trying again to become the people he meant for us to be, better prepared to face the temptations of the year to come. The Crucifixion was humanity's rock-bottom moment. That means we have nowhere to go but up.

Over the next few days, we'll remember what our Savior did for us and what happens when people surrender to ambition, hatred, and fear. But unlike the disciples, the temple authorities, the Romans, and the crowd, we are blessed to know that Jesus's story doesn't end with a hideous death and an anonymous burial in a borrowed tomb. We know that death could not defeat him, and the tomb could not hold him. Soon, we'll welcome him back with grateful hearts and joyous shouts of "Hallelujah!" And that brings us full circle. When Jesus went to the cross, only he knew what would happen next. Today, thanks be to God, so do we. Amen.