

A Personal Reflection on the Death of Jesus Christ

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(presented at Osler Mennonite Church – Sunday, August 23, 2015)

Good Morning. The Death of Jesus Christ is our meditation this morning. The poet Lewis Thompson helps us in our reading and meditation:

Christ, Supreme Poet, lived Truth
So passionately that every
Gesture of his, at once
Pure act and perfect Symbol
Embodies the Transcendent.

In this light let us consider some of the other passages in John's Gospel related to the Death of Jesus Christ that form the context of our reading of the nineteenth chapter of John.

[John 12:24-28] "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat fall into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If any one serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also....Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? "Father, save me from this hour"? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify thy name."

[John 15: 1; 4-5] "I am the true Vine....Abide in Me and I in you ...I am the Vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

[John 16:7] "It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you ...[12] I have yet many things to say to you but you cannot bear them now. [13] When the Spirit of Truth comes he will guide you into all the truth...."

Consider also what Paul to the Corinthians: "What you sow does not come to life unless it dies....Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. I tell you this brethren: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the perishable." [I Cor 15]

My own Christian faith, not rooted in any particular community, finds expression among some mystical Catholics and the most generous and liberal of the Mennonites. It has been both challenged and enlivened by an intensified experience of death over the

last several years: the loss of my spiritual mentor Father James Gray of St Peter's Abbey, Muenster, SK, the death of my Mother-in-Law, my Father, our 23 year old niece from cancer six months after her wedding, as well as the deaths of so many family friends and acquaintances.

Of late I have been meditating on the Death of Jesus. No longer with academic interest but with a new fascination since my diagnosis in May. I now find myself in a situation that has no resolution, no cure, only palliation. My best case scenario would be my 1/100000 chance of a complete remission from Stage IV colon cancer. The worst case scenario will reveal an especially aggressive cancer that will continue its progress from the colon and the lungs to ever more vital organs. Opportunities for denial are limited and my death, certain as that of any mortal, is now not only certain but relatively imminent. So my meditation begins with a simple question: "What does my faith have to do with my terminal situation?"

As mentioned I seemed to have more than a fair share of significant deaths in my life and not so long ago realized that I too will have a funeral. I find myself looking about sometimes while I sit at church at NPMC and start to think about what hymns might be appropriate and how there will be a little brass plaque with my name and dates on it on the church wall. Where might my ashes be set and will there need to be a picture of me? Blessedly a rather large cross on the sanctuary wall helps me to remember larger, deeper, context of my death. Jesus, our Teacher, has walked this cross road before me to his own death. As I mediate on the Scriptures it becomes clear in ways that I seemed not to have grasped before that Christianity has the cross as its central symbol and deepest mystery – that death is not only the natural end of all that lives but lies at the very heart of the religion that I have called my own since I was 16. I still vividly recall the ice-cold water into which I was fully immersed at my baptism. I had been told that I was baptized into the death of Jesus and my own death to sin and new life in Jesus Christ. I was cold, dripping wet and ecstatic. Many years have passed. Now I have yet another baptism that awaits me. How do I walk this way of the cross common to all yet uniquely my own? I remember Jesus, I read and reread the Gospel accounts, I call them to mind, they call me to prayer, I remember Jesus. I recall that he suffered agony in the Garden, asked the Cup to be removed, but returned in prayer to his beloved Father whose will he chose to follow rather than his own. I recall that he proceeded to walk the way of the cross to the hill of the skull. He was crucified, died, and was buried. I all this I bring to mind, again and again, that nothing I fear of the coming sufferings and pains of my disease is alien or unknown to Jesus. I recall my earlier experiences from my heart disease and open-heart surgery and recall past graces experienced in adversity. So I hope to unite myself to Jesus in the challenges to come and find a meaning in this process that involves the death of "me." I too am grain of wheat, I too am seed, I too must die. But Jesus has died and Jesus is my Teacher. In reflecting on the death of Jesus Paul prayed that his own sufferings might join with Christ's in the work of redemption. Perhaps there is a way to make our

sufferings meaningful by uniting them with those of Christ whose body is said to be the Church. Once again I am drawn back to the mystery of baptism and ways in which we may actually participate in Christ. Each day, living “in the Valley of the Shadow” becomes increasingly meaningful. I look at myself and others differently. Each of us will grow older, get sick, and someday die. The death of beings nourishes the living who in turn return to the dust. But death of beings also involves the mystery of the grain of wheat that dies, of the seed that is sown. It was necessary for Jesus to go away and it is necessary that I go too. I fear the discomforts, humiliations, and pains to come but I do not walk this journey without a Teacher. Somehow I participate in the necessary suffering of his Body. In this the best practice is to let go; to recall that all that I possess, enjoy, and cherish in this life, my very self is going to die with me and it’s okay. May I be able to say with Him “it is finished” in the knowledge that I commend myself to the One in whom we live and move and have our being! Yes death, but a death from periphery to center, to the deepest inside of everything! As Meister Eckhart once wrote back in the fourteenth century:

The seed of God is in us.
Given an intelligent and hardworking farmer
It will thrive and grow up into God, whose seed it is;
And accordingly its fruits will be God-nature.
Pear seeds grow into pear trees, nut seeds into nut trees,
And God seeds into God.

Of course, no one really knows how they will die and in the meantime I have to deal with a medical establishment that, while well-meaning, seems to assume that the terminal patient will yet wish to fight the cancer with every bit of chemo and radiation and surgery that can be provided so to grasp at life. I feel an echo in this of Dylan Thomas’ disturbing cry to his father: “Rage, Rage, against the dying of the light.” Surely our life is a gift, if life is good can we not trust that death rounding our life is not somehow also gift? Surely faith involves our response to the deepest realities of life including our dying? So I will remember Jesus, his life and his cross “Pure Act and Perfect Symbol.” Let me conclude with “The Avowal” by poet Denise Levertov:

As swimmers dare
To lie face to the sky
And water bears them
As hawks rest upon air
And air sustains them,
So would I learn to attain
Free fall, and float

Into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,
Knowing no effort earns
That all-surrounding grace.

Amen [Dated Sunday, August 23, 2015]