

GOOD FRIDAY
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Peter W. Daino
All Saints Parish, Syr. NY

Every Good Friday the people in the squatter village, where I worked in Nairobi Kenya, carry around their neighborhood a life-size cross made of two old, rough pieces of timber. One year I participated in this procession.

While I walked alongside the growing crowd, I tried to entertain what I thought were proper reflections for Good Friday. I thought of the hungry kids in the squatter village. I thought of the plastic and/or cardboard houses which were ever collapsing. I thought of how these people were like the crucified one. It was all very pious and somber. But as the procession continued I started to realize that others were not sharing these reflections.

People were singing happy songs. Their steps were light and buoyant. The procession received cheers from bystanders. The cross was lifted very high above the heads of all. It seemed to float atop the swelling throng. Some of the women were even dancing and ugulating. The scene was joyous, triumphant!

The squatters were looking at the cross in a different way than I was. They were not pitying Jesus or getting sympathetic feelings about the misery of the world. Instead they were seeing the crucified Jesus as someone who not only suffered, but managed to take this suffering and turn it into victory. Jesus didn't just die and get snuffed out; a story they all know too well. Rather, he turned hunger, poor housing, and destitution into something more. He gave meaning and promise to the very cross which they carry throughout the year, which truly has the cruel capacity to crush them. The death and Resurrection of Jesus made that same cross a window of final triumph. The cross which this Good Friday crowd lifted so high, was the winning trump card God played on their behalf. Why pity themselves? Why be afraid? The game had already been won!

On the cross, in what appears as defeat, God has won the decisive victory over sin, death and every oppression. Good Friday is a day for dancing.

This narrative comes from Stabat Mater, a book I wrote which was published by Alba Press back in 1988. Since then and until now, The Cross of Jesus remains a riddle for me. A question I have been trying to find an answer to.

Lately I have started to consider the Cross of Jesus as a kind of Zen Koan.

A Zen Master poses a question to the seeker of enlightenment, the seeker meditates on the question to work out the answer. After many years of trying to answer a question that has no answer, one discovers instead, a realization that is on the other side of thinking.

There are many excellent books on the death of Christ on the Cross. What does it mean, what did it accomplish? In fact, there is a whole theology on it called Soteriology, the science, if you will, of salvation.

Ultimately though these books cannot give answer to the death of Jesus, to the suffering we suffer, to the suffering we see in the world. The Koan: Eloi Eloi Lama Sacbathani cannot be answered with an explanation that starts with the word, Because, blah, blah, blah...

Jurgen Moltmann reflecting on what I am calling a Koan wrote:

“At the end of Christ’s Passion, on Golgotha, the place of execution, we hear a despairing cry to God. From the three synoptic Gospels we read: And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice: ‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani,’ which means ‘My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?’

We shall never be able to get used to the fact that at the very center of the Christian faith we hear this cry of the forsaken Christ for God. We shall always attempt to weaken its effect and to replace it by ‘more pious’ parting words.

Is there any answer to the question, the agonizing question of disappointment and death: My God, Why? Why?

A real answer to this question cannot be a theoretical answer beginning with the word, ‘Because.’ It has to be a practical answer. An experience of this kind can only be answered by another experience, NOT by an explanation. A reality like this can be answered only by another reality. If there is an answer to ‘Eloi, Eloi...?’

IT IS THE ANSWER OF RESURRECTION!

If Eloi Eloi Lama Sabachthani is a Koan then we will not be able to answer it with our old way of thinking. This Koan from the cross challenges us to stop thinking in our old way, there is no explanation that begins with the word, "Because." We will not find the answer reading books of Soteriology.

The cross and all the suffering we see in the world asks a radical question that can not be answered by some philosophy, but only by a radical experience, not by any words, but by the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the Eternal Easter we will experience ourselves, of which we have a foretaste every Easter when we feel its power and joy.

Indeed, we know, we know deep as we can know, in our dancing bones, that--

THE ONLY REAL ANSWER TO GOOD FRIDAY IS EASTER SUNDAY!

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