

Good Friday 2020

Reflection 1 (Nick, plus Dietrich)

Where's the good news in this?

That remains to me the essential question, the reason we turn to church, what we desperately need, and sometimes the only place we can wring out the blood from a turnip. That's perhaps a poor expression, to focus on blood when there's spitting and flogging and worse in the story. And when our news is wall-to-wall with ICUs and Personal Protective Equipment. Again, when we've got too much death in daily life, it might seem like we don't need more from an old story. Maybe it would be better for us to wring healthy turnip juice from the turnip and leave blood out of it.

But to skip to the ending, if blood from a turnip seems unlikely, it's even more unusual where rocks are ringing out. Out of death, they turn up praising. This ending is a peculiar detail to Matthew's telling of the story, and I find it fascinating and beautiful.

Luke's version has a line back on Palm Sunday. The authorities try to tell Jesus he should make his followers shut up and stop singing Hosanna. He says that if they were silent, the stones would shout.

In Matthew's Good Friday version, all of creation is responding to Jesus: the sun darkens, the curtain of the temple is torn, rocks split open, dead bodies even respond. Maybe it's in grief. Maybe anticipation. Maybe it's simply to highlight it for us. After all the cosmic phenomena, an unlikely human character finally gets it, still slow to catch on, given all those huge signs. A Roman soldier says, "Truly this man was God's son." And the women stay, wait, watch, pray.

On Sunday, the rocks will ring out again, another earthquake rolling the rock away. These are telling us, as if they are followers of Jesus, that God is here, in crucifixion and resurrection; in death, and beyond death.

Maybe we take that rare Roman soldier both in his reality and at his word. Slow to catch on, we'd like some bigger signs, to know where God is working. We hunch at trees budding and duck eggs, flowers and sunshine. We might proclaim God's presence in the busy hospitals, though the danger of

the wild guessing is that where I'd say God is for life, some self-satisfied folks say God sent the virus as a punishment to harm life.

So it would be nice if God would show up with a shout, to answer for the suffering and to proclaim goodness. It would be nice to have not just vague signs but an unambiguous answer.

But I suggest we do. In that Luke passage, Jesus said the stones would cry if we were silent. Well, we aren't. We don't need to wring an answer out of the rocks because we have a Roman soldier who tells us this is God's Son. We have Matthew telling us this is God dealing with death and bringing something radically new, refusing to be undone or overcome. We have songs to proclaim it with our own lips. Today we'll hear from others, voices that proclaim our suffering is not apart from God. We are not forsaken. There is good news in this.

You'll hear more through the service, but here's a snippet to start with surprise, not wringing blood from a turnip or lemonade from lemons, but faithfully and honestly meeting sad and desperate moments like today with God's presence. It's from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor executed by the Nazis 75 years ago yesterday, a man acquainted with sorrow, but still hopeful:

God lets himself be pushed out of the world onto the cross; God is impotent and weak in the world and yet specifically and only so that God is with us and helps us.

Suffering and God are no contradiction, but much more a necessary unity: for me that idea that God himself suffered was always one of the most convincing teachings of Christianity. I think that God is closer to suffering than to happiness, and to find God in this manner gives peace and rest, and a strong and courageous heart.

(Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Mystery of Easter, p10)

May God find you with peace, rest, and courage.

Reflection 2 (Paul)

As we heard Peter lamenting his denial and Judas repenting of his betrayal of Jesus, with bleak separation and maybe despondency, it made me think of this passage of Paul I happened through in

my daily Bible reading this week. They seemed like good words for this time of coronavirus, as we're in it together, and our sorrows lend compassion and the ability to console each other and we're trying so hard to help as caring community, and we'd say that primarily is grounded in God's consolation and compassion.

It also reminds me we aren't stuck in our worst moments; Good Friday is about God coming to find us wherever we are suffering, including in not having done the right thing. This day isn't just about afflictions, but about consolation that abounds through Jesus.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering. Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation.

We were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.

(2 Corinthians 1:3-7, 8b-9)

May you be consoled by and rely on God who raises the dead.

Reflection 3 (Charlotte Brontë)

I mentioned there are peculiar details that only Matthew tells. That includes a few with Pontius Pilate. Another unlikely character to confess about Jesus is Pilate's wife. From the brief mention of her dream, this poem envisions more, like how she personally despises the vile political leader as much

as the masses. More, it shares our own feeling futile in failing to make a difference. She knows our sense of wishing we could do something more. Here are excerpts from the poem.

All black—one great cloud, drawn from east to west,
Conceals the heavens, but there are lights below;
Torches burn in Jerusalem, and cast
On yonder stony mount a lurid glow.
I see men station'd there, and gleaming spears;
A sound, too, from afar, invades my ears.

I see it all—I know the dusky sign—
A cross on Calvary, which Jews uprear
While Romans watch; and when the dawn shall shine
Pilate, to judge the victim, will appear—
Pass sentence—yield Him up to crucify;
And on that cross the spotless Christ must die.

Dreams, then, are true—for thus my vision ran;
Surely some oracle has been with me,
The gods have chosen me to reveal their plan,
To warn an unjust judge of destiny:
I, slumbering, heard and saw; awake I know,
Christ's coming death, and Pilate's life of woe.

I do not weep for Pilate—who could prove
Regret for him whose cold and crushing sway
No prayer can soften, no appeal can move:
Who tramples hearts as others trample clay,
Yet with a faltering, an uncertain tread,
That might stir up reprisal in the dead.

Forced to sit by his side and be his wife—
Forced to behold that visage, hour by hour,
He has no more from me Than any wretch[ed] life ;
A triple lust of gold, and blood, and power;
A soul whom motives fierce, yet abject, urge—
Rome's servile slave, and Judah's tyrant scourge.

And now, the envious Jewish priests have brought
Jesus—whom they in mock'ry call their king—
To have, by this grim power, their vengeance wrought;
By this mean reptile, innocence to sting.
Oh! could I but the purposed doom avert,
And shield the blameless head from cruel hurt!

What is this Hebrew Christ? to me unknown
His lineage—doctrine—mission; yet how clear
Is God-like goodness in his actions shown,
How straight and stainless is his life's career!
The ray of God rests on him; but will his faith
Survive the terrors of to-morrow's death ?

This day, Time travails with a mighty birth;

This day, Truth stoops from heaven and visits earth;
Ere night descends I shall more surely know
What guide to follow, in what path to go;
I wait in hope—I wait in solemn fear,
The oracle of God—the sole—true God—to hear.

<https://poets.org/poem/pilates-wifes-dream>

Even if unable to avert doom or woe, may you wait
in hope to know more of what comes to birth.

Reflection 4 (Oscar Romero)

With this final spoken reflection, before you get a moment to reflect yourself where all of this takes you and what goodness you wring out of it, this last bit was spoken on Good Friday by Saint Oscar Romero, killed just over 40 years ago during a church service in El Salvador. Maybe singing in concert with Bonhoeffer, Archbishop Romero holds the hard words of forsakenness, wondering where God is when it feels like we'd want so much more or something else. Is God responding? That's maybe down to the central difficulty of this day, of our current desperate moment, of how in the world God is present on a cross and here.

God is not failing us when we don't feel [a] presence. Let's not say: God doesn't do what I pray for so much, and therefore I don't pray anymore.

God exists, and God exists even more, the farther [away] you feel. When you feel the anguished desire for God to come near because you don't feel God present, then God is very close to your anguish.

When are we going to understand that God not only gives happiness but also [encourages] our faithfulness in moments of affliction? It is then that prayer and religion have most merit: when one is faithful in spite of not feeling the Lord's presence.

Let us learn from that cry of Christ that God is always our Father and never forsakes us, and that we are closer to God than we think.

(Violence of Love, p131)

May you know God is close and will not fail you.