

Holy Week Cantata: The Heritage Chorale
The Man from Nazareth, a Meditation, by The Rev. Peter Faass
March 28, 2010: Palm Sunday

“Now the men began to mock [Jesus] and beat him . . . [and] they kept heaping many other insults on him. (Luke 22:63,65)

“O bleeding Head, so wounded, reviled and put to scorn.”

“And they that passed by reviled Him.”

Jesus’ Passion: that time between his arrest in the garden of Gethsemane and his death on a cross. Those painfully slow, agonizing hours when he was beaten, reviled, scorned, mocked, scourged and executed in the most humiliating and excruciating way known to humanity.

Jesus, who was the embodiment of love, compassion and justice for all God’s children; this very same Jesus - God incarnate who came to earth to teach us how to live so that we might have real life - in his final hours received the absolute worst that humanity could heap upon him. It is a tragedy beyond our wildest imagination that Jesus, who is love itself, failed to receive one iota of love in those waning moments of his life.

If you ever had even a smidgen of doubt that this man Jesus was God’s Son, that he is the Savior and Redeemer of the entire Creation, doubt no more. It is the glorious fact that Jesus, even when he emerged from a night of betrayal, malignant questioning, being stripped, mocked, beaten and scourged, still, *still* could say as he hung from the ugly hardwood of the cross, bleeding and gasping for breath as he suffocated under the weight of own body, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34) *Who else but God’s Son could utter that absolution?*

O, holy Jesus! Pardon our offenses, for you have inexplicably made us yours, and you have redeemed us by your precious blood.

Jesus’ trial and execution were all a set-up, of course. Evil reared its ugly head and infected the hearts of men in response to the love that Jesus proclaimed.

Evil opposing love is nothing new to us who live in the 21st century. Whenever the prophetic voice of hope has risen to speak truth to power on behalf of the poor, the sick, the afflicted, the marginalized, the down-trodden, the unloved, evil power reacts swiftly to silence it. Think of:

- The German Lutheran pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer
- The civil rights leader, Martin Luther King
- Women’s rights leader, Muktaran Bibi in Pakistan
- The civil rights activist, Jonathan Myrick-Daniels
- Pro-democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma
- Anti-apartheid leader, Nelson Mandella in South Africa
- Voice for the poor, Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador

These are but a few voices of love and justice in recent history which have seen the evil of power swiftly rise to silence, if not totally eradicate them.

Jesus’ voice of love and justice threatened the Jewish leadership of his day, as well as the Roman authorities. And they rose in tandem to silence and eradicate him. The charges leveled against Jesus were entirely political. His message threatened the political establishment of both Church and State, because Jesus’ message of love and compassion was empowering the poor and the down-

trodden. And empowered people who have nothing are always seen as threatening by those in power, to those who have everything.

Because of that it was the aristocratic, political classes of Jerusalem society who contrived Jesus' arrest and death. They were terrified of what his love would unleash; terrified after seeing the large, enthusiastic Palm Sunday crowds hail him as king.

Terrified that the numbers of people following Jesus would swell further and prove a disturbing element in their world.

Terrified they would lose their wealth, their comfort and their grip on power.

They wanted Jesus gone and so they manipulated Pilate and the Romans, who were equally terrified of a Jewish revolt against them. So Pilate and Rome put Jesus on trial and then they put him to death -- because of love.

There is a Holy Week hymn in the Episcopal Hymnal 1982 whose first verse says, "*Ah, holy Jesus, how hast thou offended, that man to judge thee hath in hate pretended? By foes derided, by thine own rejected. O most afflicted.*" (Hymnal 1982 # 158)

Ah, holy Jesus, indeed; how hast thou offended?

President Barack Obama and the Congress have just passed and signed legislation for major health care reform in our nation. For close to a year we have seen our government in Washington and much of the populace engage in something just short of armed conflict over this issue. It has been a sad, revolting and at times horrifying scene.

It has been my long-held belief that health care is not only a basic human right, it is a deep Christian value. Over and over again the Gospel speaks of Jesus' healing the sick. Jesus believed in health care and so should we!

If we truly believe as Christians that we are to work with all our heart, mind, soul and strength to follow Jesus that means we are called to be healers. One of the most effective ways we can be healers in this world is to ensure basic health care for all people. "Just "as you have done it unto the least of these, so have you done it unto me," Jesus said.

Providing basic health care to those who can't afford their own is to provide basic health care to Jesus himself. Providing basic health care for those in need is to become the healing hands of Jesus in the world.

And for the doubters and skeptics, all I have to say is that this is not some pie in the sky goal or something that we need to wait to get in the next life. God in Jesus desires righteousness and justice for all God's children here and now. The Kingdom of God is very near us and we - *if we dare* - become the tipping point to making that Kingdom come to be!

But if we were looking for that Kingdom justice to be easily achieved, or if we thought that all Americans were of like mind about righteousness and justice for all, we are seriously mistaken. Speaking truth to power on health care reform provoked those in power. Blind to the truth that God's good creation can provide enough for all, evil power worked over-time to prevent health care reform from ever seeing the light of day. Just as the aristocratic classes and political powers of Jesus' day were terrified of what the empowered poor, sick and down-trodden people of their time might mean to their holding onto to power, so too our own aristocratic and political classes were terrified of what empowered, sick and down-trodden people in our time would mean to their own grip on power.

So just as with Jesus, they reviled, scorned, derided and mocked anyone who supported the love and compassion for all that this legislation represented. Hatred was in no short supply as opponents worked to manipulate the ultimate crucifixion of the health care reform bill.

Those who supported health care reform were subject to some of the vilest behavior imaginable. Communist, socialist, baby-killer, death panels, anti-American, un-Christian, they shouted. Television commentator Glenn Beck amazingly even proclaimed that social justice for all God's children was antithetical to the message of the Bible and the Christian faith! And he received his theology degree from where?

Congressional Black Caucus members Carl Lewis and Andre Carson were vilified by a group of protesters screaming “kill the bill” and punctuated their chants with the vile N-word. Congressman Barney Frank, who is gay, encountering a similar group, was called a faggot, which was met with enthusiastic whoops of laughter by the protesters.

Closer to home in Columbus, a man with Parkinson’s disease was ruthlessly heckled at an anti-health care reform rally. “If you’re looking for a handout, you’re in the wrong part of town!” one protester yelled at the ill man. “Nothing for free here, you have to work for everything you get!”

As we hear this performance of the Palm Sunday Cantata, “The Man from Nazareth” our minds should focus on all the ways that Jesus’ fate has been the fate of others. We should never forget the sacrifices people have made to achieve social justice in the world. We should never forget that as followers of Jesus we are also called to risk being mocked and despised as we speak up for justice. And most importantly, we should never forget that in the midst of these cesspools of hate and opposition to God’s kingdom building, love prevailed. Love prevailed with health-care reform, just as love prevailed for Jesus. As Christians we must always hold fast to the words of St. John who said that, “the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.” (John. 1:5) Ever!

In the Episcopal service for Morning Prayer there is a Collect that states, Almighty God, whose most dear Son, went not up to joy but first suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace.”

This prayer reminds us that God’s kingdom comes with a price. I think the truth is that we don’t ever truly come to know God’s kingdom without our paying some price, at some level, in some way. Pain and crucifixion are a refiner’s fire. The road to the empty tomb always goes through Calvary.

It is only through picking up and carrying our own cross - just as Jesus picked up and carried his own cross - that we will find life and peace and justice and righteousness for all God’s children.

Amen.