

JUST A MARTYR?

Good Friday Meditation

April 15, 2022

In the original Greek, a “marturio” is a witness, it is a Greek legal term for someone who gives testimony in a court of law. In the face of Roman persecution in the first three centuries, when Christians were put on trial for refusing to participate in state religious activities, they held to their “testimony,” and the word martyr began to take on a new ... and grim ... meaning. Their Lord had called them to be faithful witnesses, and for those who did so in the face of persecution, their faith-ful witness became fate-ful, leading to imprisonment and death. In a sense, Jesus was a martyr, killed for His “witness”, His testimony, His faithfulness. But He was more than just a martyr. Before saying anything else, let me clarify I am by no means denigrating and/or making light of the tremendous faith, unflappable dedication, heroic courage and passionate integrity of those who have been martyred, killed, for their steadfast faithfulness and convictions. However, this day we commemorate that Jesus was more than a man dying for a cause or a conviction. Jesus had no desire to be a political martyr. He was not being killed simply because He was “*Challenging the Establishment,*” or “*Speaking Truth to Power,*” or “*Confronting Corrupt Systems.*” The Bible is clear there was a higher and holier purpose and an absolute necessity for His death, which is arguably the principle reason He came.

By the way, for those of you knowledgeable about church history, don't confuse the meditation title with the early church father and Christian apologist Justin Martyr (*his original name was Flavia Neapolis when he was born @ 100 AD; he adopted the name later.*) Justin's works represent the earliest surviving Christian apologies. During his entire Christian life, Christianity was something of an outlaw religion; Justin Martyr wrote lengthy apologies, or defenses, of the faith to the Roman authorities. When he was eventually arrested in Rome in 165 AD, the prefect Rusticus requested Justin to denounce his faith by making a sacrifice to the gods. Justin replied, “*No one who is rightly minded turns from true belief to false.*” He was summarily executed, beheaded.

Some of you may remember the “trick” question I put to the Confirmation Classes every year. “*Can God make a rock so large that even He can't move it?*” Can't the all powerful God do anything He wants? Well, the short answer is “No.” There are some things that God cannot do. He can not do anything contrary to His nature, His essence, His “God-ness.” I know that sounds a little like theological gobbledegook, but God does have limitations, limitations He cannot violate and still retain His characteristic and essential God-ness. God can not sin. Plus, the One Who is the embodiment of truth can not lie. The short answer to the question is that He will not, and indeed can not, make such a rock, thus creating something beyond His ultimate control and abdicating His sovereignty. Abdicating His sovereignty would make Him less than God. The Bible also tells us God is good. All the time! And God is love. Love is the essence of His character. He cannot be unloving and still be God. However, the God who is Love is also the God Who is holy ... pure, sinless, perfect. Purity, holiness and perfection by definition cannot be adulterated by contact with the impure, the sinful, the imperfect. So, the impure, sinful people He loves must be provided a way to become pure, if they are to commune with Him ... and so we are told that God so loved the world, that He sent His Son.

As finite beings we'll never fully understand the infinite mind of God this side of heaven, but we are told enough to know that this was the only way to reconcile the dilemma. As we read last night, according to Mark, Jesus prayed, “*Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.*” God denied His Son's request in the Garden, because of His holiness and because of His love. There **was** no other way to secure the salvation of His people; so Jesus accepted it, and went on to suffer the consequences of our sin.

“Crux” is the Latin word for “Cross;” it is the word from which we derive the English words “crux” and “crucial”. There was a time when a person wasn't supposed to mention the word “crux” in polite society. If you were a well-bred Roman in the days of the Roman Empire, the Latin word “crux” was one of those words you just didn't use if you had manners. The crux was used for crucifixion; it had no other purpose. This tortuous and gruesome form of execution just wasn't talked about in respectable company. In that cultural context, the Roman citizen and former Pharisee Paul wrote, “*God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” Again and again Paul writes “*We preach Christ crucified.*” As if to say, “*I don't care about cultural convention. We MUST talk about the cross!*” For the cross is the crux of the Christian faith. As Isaiah foretold, “*God laid on Him the iniquity of us all.*” Thus providing a way for a holy, loving God to do what He could not otherwise do: embrace His less than holy people, and welcome them into fellowship with Him.

And as I said in closing last night during our Maundy Thursday meditation: The sad commemoration of Good Friday, this unhappy celebration, serves to remind us that there is One Who is Good ... one Who is good enough to save us, One Who is good enough to cover us with His goodness, the only One Who is good enough to make us good in the sight of a good and gracious God. And that He chose to do so is indeed *good* cause for celebration.