

Easter Sunday

27th March, 2005

Hear we are: the first Sunday after the first full moon, after the Spring Equinox. Happy Easter. Not perhaps all that spring-like – but we have seen pussy willows.

This past week, Holy Week, our neighbors who worship in the Christian tradition, have been revisiting the old drama of the passion of Jesus. A young man enters the city and is greeted with palms of victory and hosanna. The week progresses. Feet are washed. Meals are shared. Power is confronted. Innocence suffers and is crucified.

This dreadful image of crucifixion, of pain and hope, compassion and redemption, has deep roots in human consciousness and human need. In its Christian form it is an inescapable part of western culture. For good or for ill. Even though it was not adopted as a pre-eminent symbol of Christianity until the seventh century, it is powerful.

Alas, the assaults on human worth and dignity it has inspired are endless. It has been used to terrify children with guilt, to justify violence, and to evoke disempowering and unjust self-sacrifice, as when a battered wife is urged to stay in a violent marriage – her ‘cross to bear’ – until she is murdered there. Some have called it an image of child abuse.

The image of the crucifixion has also inspired some of the bravest, noblest deeds of freely-chosen generosity, as when Father Damien dedicated his life to the lepers of Molokai, and Mother Theresa hers to the dying in Calcutta.

It is difficult for our modern minds to truly understand this crucifix symbol, for it is grounded in a reality few of us experience these days. Two thousand years ago people did often die miserably and publicly. The sight of a human body, tortured by illness or violence, and open to public view, was no stranger then. But now we are generally spared the worst of this, and the only corpse on open view, in all its agony, is that of Jesus.

I am intrigued that in art we sometimes project our own features onto those of the suffering, anointed one. In the chapel at Providence Hospital you may see a stained glass Jesus with Japanese-American features; the name of the artist was – Kimura.

Much ink has been spilled over the body on the cross. Some read the stories through a literary-historical analysis, trying to sift truth from legend. Some read the stories as literal truth, despite their mutual contradictions. Some read the gospels as merely one flowering of a great tree of myth and mystery as old as humanity. Like the Green Man of pagan fertility rites, and the heroes of Frazier’s “Golden Bough”, the hero who dies in sacrifice to bring new life echoes the cycles of nature in almost every culture. Some read this pattern as a spiritual drama of the divine, entering each person, each of us, to bring us to full consciousness of the holy, and draw us back at death to the same creative force that sent us into life. For them, each of us, in turn, is the anointed one.

Last year Mel Gibson made a movie. Personally, I still prefer the film “Jesus of Montreal”. This year Tom Harpur, a noted Toronto journalist and writer on religion, wrote a book: “The Pagan Christ”. Harpur’s argument is that the gospels are mystery dramas that came out of Egyptian myth and Hellenic and Gnostic mystery rituals. Harpur says the lesson of these dramas is that the ever-returning solar deity – the anointed one- is each of us. Each of us. He argues that it was a gross distortion of Christian mystery when an Imperial church ripped the stories out of their timeless setting, rooted them in history, and fixed them on one divine personality alone, one time in history ever, not on all human beings, each year anew.

My sense is that most of Tom Harpur’s arguments are not new. He says so himself. What is new is that they are published and distributed by the popular press. And Tom Harpur, trained as an Anglican priest, is writing them up, with gladness and hope.

To sum up, we’ve looked at this disturbing, compelling image of the crucifix as an inspiration of the best and worst in human actions. We can read it as literal, or symbolic; as a mystery of cosmic renewal, or personal transformation. We’ve considered how each might project something of ourselves into the symbolism, and read it in our own way.

I asked a friend of mine, a devout, observant liberal Roman Catholic, what it meant to her. To her, the crucifix is a call to compassion. It is a call to stand by those who suffer, and not abandon them. It is a call to recognize the holy as incarnate – in the flesh – and intimately present with those who suffer. Compassion. Being present. Incarnation.

The front page ‘passion,’ or suffering, of Terry Schiavo and her family reminds us how difficult it is to engage ultimate, incarnate agony. It is very difficult, when there is no way of ‘fixing’ something, to just be present with suffering. But that’s another sermon.

The Pope, John Paul II, has openly revealed the progress of Parkinson’s disease through his body. With this openness he too is calling us to stand by in compassion with all those who suffer, and to honor human reality and worth and dignity.

Last year, when I was leaving Long Beach, California after General Assembly, I looked around the hotel lobby and realized it was filling up with the next wave of guests – many fit young men with shiny metal sticks where their legs used to be. They don’t show you that, on the Army recruiting posters. Incarnational. In each of us.

When I am asked whether I am a Christian, I’m never sure what to say. Yes and no. It depends. Essentially, all Unitarians and Universalists were Christian until around 1835. Then the Transcendentalists read the Bagavad Gita and pondered the G-d within each of us. Charles Darwin (born a Unitarian) set humanity truly, incarnationally, among all flesh and evolving species, one with all living things and the earth itself. Scholars of world religion recognized continuities threaded through all faiths, and suspected that faith is innate in all human beings, risen up out of the human need to seek and shape meaning.

Holy Week. I saw some Christians last Wednesday, down at Bean’s Café, washing feet for Holy Week, as they do once a month, November through April. The foot washing

clinic is a modest venture. It won't save the world overnight. It does show faith and hope and trust and love, on both sides of the basin. Faith and hope and trust and love.

As the Pope and Terri Schiavo could tell you, if they were not voiceless, fixed in their suffering, this business of being spirit in flesh brings us all to struggle with issues of power and control and hope and trust.

What do I really know about this image of passion and compassion, cross and crucifix? Not a lot. I was not raised to it. I will never have the visceral response that those of us who were raised to it might have. I feel mostly curiosity about a powerful symbol that is largely neutral to me.

I do recognize one thing, whenever lines cross. I recognize a point where the horizontal holy that I believe exists in all that is, meets the vertical inspiration that calls us to heal the world and be more than we are. I see that point in any crossing. I see there the place where we live, here and now, doing the best we can in faith and hope and trust and love. I see there the place where our horizon meets the shooting star.

I believe profoundly that the holy – whatever that might be – is incarnational, in rocks and trees, in animals and plants, and in ourselves, in our flesh. I believe it is the very fragility of these human vessels of flesh that carry spirit that makes our lives so very precious.

And I believe in the profound truths of the revolving year, the seasons, moon and sun, rest and return and renewal. I believe we recognize these cycles of renewal in all the old dramas of hope and rebirth and that is what makes them so powerful.

When I look upon these pitiful symbols of cross and crucifixion, what I see are the fugitive slaves of the Roman Empire. The fugitives, the runaways – there is a bitter irony in their punishment. It was the runaways who were routinely condemned to be fixed in one spot in this terrible death, all their motion taken away. Things have gotten better, in 2000 years. We don't do that anymore.

And so, for the condemned to spring free of this fixed death some way, if only in dream or drama, is a symbol of hope. Springing free from fate is not so easy. Imagining that freedom, and wanting it, for oneself and for others, is a triumph over oppression and human frailty. That's what I see in that symbol on a good day. I wonder what you see.

In conclusion, I wish you a Happy Easter, first Sunday after the first full moon after Spring Equinox. And for each of you, I hope, new life, abundant life, in the fresh newness of the revolving year, in faith and hope and trust and love.

May all be well with you.
May you be filled with loving kindness.
May you be happy, and compassionate, and joyful and free.

Rev. Frances Dearman
March 27th, 2005