

God cannot be broken.

A sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Canady III

Rector of Christ Church, New Bern, NC on Good Friday, April 14, 2017

There is an irony in all of this, isn't there. There is an irony that we sit vigil each year for someone who was wrongly arrested, tried in a sham court, handed over to an occupying ruler, beaten within an inch of his life only to endure the most horrific, brutal six hours before his body gave out. There's not only an irony in remembering this event, but that we call it "Good." As we do every year along with millions of Christians around the globe, we remember the sacrifice of Jesus' life as we ponder what it means for us as 21st Century followers living in a country and a world that could never have been imagine by Jesus or his followers two millennia ago.

The Persians first develop crucifixion as a means of torture and death about 300 years before Jesus. The Romans, never to be outdone, "perfected" the method about over the next 200 years. Archeologists and historians contend that Rome used it as a political deterrent to any who would dare oppose Rome¹. Those crucified were left on the cross in most situations to serve as a reminder to the occupied people as well as those visiting the region knew what would await them if they caused a disruption, a disturbance like turning over the tables in the Temple or calling yourself the Son of God. The first of those could lead to a riot and the second was the title for the Emperor alone.

The Gospels, especially John's Gospel, wants to give Pontius Pilate a "free-pass," to make him look like an unknowing pawn in God's divine plan. History suggests that Pilate was unafraid of quelling a rebellion by brutally dispatching with the trouble-makers. The two others crucified with Jesus are often called "thieves" but the word can also be translated as "insurgent," the same word Luke uses to refer to Barabbas, the one Pilate released. Some historians have reason to believe that the two crucified with Jesus were co-conspirators with Barabbas.

If there is anything that puts Jesus' humanity and divinity so squarely side-by-side, it's the violent means by which Jesus died. It is unlikely that he was taken into custody gently or carefully. He was kept awake and questioned all night. He was taken from one authority to another, while the religious leaders looked for a means to kill him. Pilate probably assumed that a severe lashing would appease the Temple leadership. The Roman means of doing this involved long leather straps with pieces of bone and metal and glass secured to the end. So that each time it hit Jesus' back, it would make an indentation and pull off parts of skin. When the Roman soldiers put the purple robe on him, and few minutes later took it off, it would have been put over and ripped off those fresh, bloody wounds.

As Jesus was led away, he was carrying his cross, or some portion of it, on the same raw, bloody back that was recently whipped. And to be cure, the cross was not polished or sanded or smooth. It was a rough piece of wood, something akin to a railroad tie.

¹ <http://www.newsweek.com/how-romans-used-crucifixion-including-jesus-political-weapon-318934>

Crucifixion puts the body in very unnatural positions². Beyond having heavy-weight nails through his wrists and feet, his legs would have been put in such a way to cause cramping in his calves very quickly. Joints would have been dislocated and so much body weight would have been pressing down on his chest that breathing would have been painful and difficult. But the body will always try to get air, so he would have pushed against the nails and the pain to find a way to breathe. One does not survive crucifixion, of course. That's the whole point. You are embarrassed. Humiliated. Inflicted with pain beyond measure. Hanging naked for everyone to see. Sometimes the Romans would provide a small seat so the condemned would last longer, even up to nine days, according to some historians. Jesus was dead in roughly 6 hours.

If they needed to expedite the death, Roman soldiers would break the condemned persons legs to that it would be impossible, not just difficult, to push up and get a breath. One's heart and lungs would fill with fluid quickly, snuffing out their life.

But why?

Why would God allow this?

Why would God be subjected to such a horrible and brutal ending to this chapter of ministry?

To simply say, "Because God loved humanity" is not enough. God loved humanity long before Jesus and showed that love in lots of ways, redeeming Israel time and again when leaving them to their own devices would have been more than justified.

But the powers and forces of this world can do nothing to stop God. It wasn't just a sacrifice for sin, the Passover lamb, that Jesus represented. It wasn't just the act of atoning for the sins of the world, both past, present, and future.

It was a defiant show of force by God, that humanity can do its worst, it can put God in unnatural positions, it can contort God for our pleasure or our own cause or to fit our whim. Humanity can attempt to beat God to an unrecognizable point, mock God with words and actions, and even try to make God humiliated by nakedness.

And yet... **GOD CANNOT BE BROKEN.**

Jesus did not fight to the death. Jesus gave up his Spirit. Jesus, God in the flesh, didn't succumb to putting down those who did this to him, nor did he push back against the criminal who mocked him. Jesus, in moments of great pain and anguish, **SHOWED MERCY**. Mercy and humility showed forth from him to the point that a Roman Centurion, an officer of the Empire, declared that he must be God's son.

² <http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/killing-jesus/articles/how-did-crucifixion-kill-a-person/>

God cannot and will not be broken, so that even as Mary, Joseph of Arimathea, and Nicodemus took that beaten and tattered body off the cross and laid him in a tomb, God was preparing to Show how even death was not final for Jesus and those who believed that God's work in the world would prevail.

The brokenness of humanity is all around us. At what point will we allow the unbreakable nature of God to heal that brokenness and put our world into right relationship with our creator?

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