

Good Friday can be a day of intense emotional response;  
I have seen quiet tears and open weeping;  
I have also seen people overcome by an otherworldly peace  
and almost bliss at the end of this service.  
Once and only once so far, though,  
have I seen this service elicit in someone  
the emotion of anger.

It was a Good Friday at which I was presiding a few years ago.  
During the middle of the Passion story,  
the story we just read together,  
a woman in the congregation  
very noticeably got up from her seat  
and left the church with the kind of heavy footsteps  
that are the mark of a departure of protest.

And as soon as I saw who it was who had been angered  
by the Passion story,  
my heart sank.  
Because I knew her,  
though she was not technically a parishioner of that church.  
She was married to one of the parishioners,  
indeed, her husband was in the choir.  
She had come to that service to hear him sing,  
and the last thing she expected  
when she showed up at her husband's church  
was to feel personally attacked.

But that's what happened, because this person was Jewish.  
And as we told the story of the Passion according to John,  
this text we were all treating  
with such sacredness and reverence,  
all she could hear was:  
"The Jews," "the Jews," "the Jews."

The Jews did this.  
The Jews did that.  
The Jews said this.  
The Jews demanded Jesus' death.  
Did you notice how many times this term is used  
in the Passion we just read?

She was justifiably angry because she knew the long history  
of the most horrendous crimes being committed  
against the Jewish people  
by Christians seeking to punish them for killing Jesus.  
And she knew that Good Friday itself  
was the cause of so many such crimes in the Middle Ages.  
Good Friday was a day  
when European Christians would put on Passion Plays  
in order to work themselves up into  
into a feverous rage,  
and then attack, loot, rape, and murder  
their Jewish neighbors.  
One might say that the annual observance of Good Friday  
has been an engine propelling European antisemitism  
over the last two millennia and even now.

What, then, shall we do?

Is this service we do today too tainted with the past sins of  
our Christian forebears?

Is John's gospel too antisemitic to be salvific for us anymore?

I don't think so.

In fact, I think the story John tells about Jesus' death  
is precisely an answer

to antisemitism and any other kind of hatred

Christians have been tempted to hold for others.

For one thing:

This is partly just a problem of translation.

In the original Greek of the gospel, there is no term "the Jews."

The word is *Ioudaioi*; the Judeans.

If you replace every instance of "the Jews" in this story

with "the Judeans," then the Passion has a very different,  
much less Nazi-ish ring to it.

But it's not just a matter of hitting Control+F on your keyboard.

It's not just that we can soften an anti-Jewish attitude in John's  
gospel,

we can see that being anti-Jewish

misses the entire point of the Passion story as John tells it.

What's so marvelously ludicrous about the way John tells this story

is that he makes it clear to us that,

in earthly terms, Jesus' execution has, actually,

nothing to do with Jesus at all.

This drama we just heard unfold is not of

Jesus versus the Jews

or of Jesus versus the Romans

or even really of the Jews versus the Romans.

The drama is really about two individuals.

Pilate, the Roman Governor,  
and Caiaphas, the high priest of the Jerusalem Temple.

John is clear about that.

Before the last supper, John tells us that Caiaphas  
is afraid that the Romans are going to slaughter his people,  
and so he decides to try to find someone,  
some scapegoat,  
that the Romans might execute  
and thereby spare the rest.

That is the real reason that Jesus

is hunted down, arrested, and handed over to Pilate.

It has nothing to do with what he's said, or taught, or done.

Jesus knows that, and that's why he says at his trial:

“Why are you asking me about my teachings.

I've said everything openly; I've said nothing in secret.”

He knows that this is all pretense.

And what about Pilate?

Pilate has absolutely no interest in killing Jesus,  
that is clear from all this back and forth in the story.

But if he doesn't kill Jesus,  
then he thinks he'll have a religious riot on his hands,  
stirred up by the Temple authorities.

In other words,

Ciaphas wants to kill Jesus  
because he thinks that will appease Pilate.

Pilate wants to kill Jesus  
because he thinks that will appease Ciaphas.

Do you see how ridiculous this is?

It's almost comedic.

They are so scared of one another.

How different their relationship would have been  
if they could have admitted this to one another.

How different the story would have gone  
if they had talked to one another.

Sometimes, a truthful conversation is all  
that stands between us and the Kingdom --  
it really can be that simple.

And so John's Passion does not permit us to think  
of how wicked and evil these men are.

John's Passion does not give us the luxury of villains,  
bad guys we can hate so easily  
and blame for Jesus' death.

John's Passion shows us how Caiaphas and Pilate,  
and those they command with them,  
have all been caught up in a situation  
none of them created themselves,  
and which none of them particularly wants to be in,  
an impossible impasse of toxic politics  
born of imperialistic greed and religious jingoism.

And yet, even more deeply, this Passion story is not a tragedy.

It's not a tale the Greeks might have told in their theaters  
about how the fates conspire against us.

Because underlying all of this,  
underlying the mutual fear between Caiaphas and Pilate,  
underlying the toxic politics  
underlying the history of empires and temples,  
is God's own creative and redeeming purpose in history.

And that is the ultimate reason why the last thing we can do  
when we hear John's Passion story is start looking for  
someone to blame, someone to punish.  
Because the death Jesus endures is a death he chooses freely.  
Because the Cross Jesus hangs upon is the salvation  
prepared for us by the Creator of all things.  
Because it is for God's purpose, above all else,  
that the story unfolds as it does.

On the Cross, Jesus reveals to us that there is nowhere  
that our God will not go,  
no pain that God will not endure,  
no evil God will not take on,  
no conflict God will not get into the middle of  
in order to find us, to restore us, and to love us.

On the Cross, Jesus unleashes God's love upon the whole world,  
there's no place where it cannot be found,  
there is no face in which it cannot be seen,  
there is no voice in which it cannot be heard.

No instrument of torture, no miscarriage of justice  
is enough to dissuade God's mission.

Even the gates of Hell itself cannot keep Jesus out.

If we use the Cross to divide ourselves from others,  
we have sorely missed the point.

If we use the Cross to make ourselves superior to  
Jews or Muslims or Sikhs or Hindus or Indigenous religions,  
we have *sorely* missed the point.

Jesus said, "When I am lifted from the earth,  
I will draw all people -- *all* people -- to myself."

Wherever there is a Ciaphas and a Pilate;  
    wherever camps are divided against each other  
        out of hatred or, more likely,  
        simply out of mutual fear of one another,  
between them, in the midst of them,  
is always where Christ will be waiting,  
his arms stretched out upon the cross,  
    reaching across the divide.

At the foot of the Cross, John presents us with a different pair,  
    a foil to the first.  
    Ciaphas and Pilate have faded back into history.  
    And John turns our attention now instead upon two figures:  
    Mary his mother  
    and his beloved disciple.

With his dying breaths Jesus says to his mother:

    “Here is your son,”

    And to his beloved disciple, he says, “Here is your mother.”

At the foot of the cross,

    for those with the courage to follow Jesus that far,  
there the divisions of blood and tribe and creed are cast away,  
    are those who are drawn together  
    by God’s boundless love  
    are adopted into a new family.  
    a new kind of community,  
    a holy people whose mission is simple and singular:  
    to make real by our lives  
    what Jesus has made true by his death:

that all things, absolutely everything,  
every speck, every atom, every energy field,  
every plant and animal, every creature in the sea,  
every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth,  
every last person who has, does, or will walk upon this planet  
every *one* and every *thing*  
is being brought to its perfection right now  
by the one through whom all things were made.  
The one through whom God created  
and has today even more wonderfully restored  
all of us. Amen.