

Good Friday (B)

John 18:1-19:37

Are you familiar with the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*? It's a "relatively" modern musical interpretation of the events of Holy Week. It was popular when I was in college in the early 70s. I saw the performance several times in those days, and I think I wore out the record album.

A while back, I heard they updated the musical. The lyrics and music are still the same, but the sets and costumes are very different. Rather than using a mainly bare stage and dressing the characters in a sibilance of biblical clothing, this new version uses modern props with plenty of flashy lights and electronic wizardry, and the actors are dressed in modern-day clothing. The idea behind these changes was to attract a younger audience, to make it more relative to the times, and apparently, it's been quite successful.

Anyway, every Lent, normally around Holy Week, I listen to the soundtrack of *Jesus Christ Superstar* in my car, normally several times. It's amazing, but after all these years—including three years of theological studies in seminary—I still really like the play. Of course, it's not very accurate, biblically, and I don't agree with most of the theology it expresses. However, it's hard to argue with the play's conclusion: Jesus died a horrible, gruesome death on a Roman cross.

As I've listened to the soundtrack lately, one particular line keeps jumping out at me. It's in the song "I Don't Know How to Love Him," sung by Mary Magdalene. The song is about her confused feelings for Jesus, and several times she sings the words, "I never thought it would come to this, what's it all about?" While the line, in context, really speaks of relationships, it has struck me in a different way. I've found myself thinking about it from the standpoint of Jesus' followers who watched in horror as their master was savagely crucified. "I never thought it would come to this, what's it all about?"

I've also tried to look at it from our perspective today—what is it all about? Why did Jesus have to die? What was God doing in Jesus in this ghastly, gruesome death? What did this event mean then, and what does it mean now?

Of course, I'm not the first person to ask those questions. Humanity has been asking them for almost 2,000 years. And many people throughout that time—people much smarter than me—have come up with some answers. Or, more accurately, they've come up with some theories revolving around images or symbols found in the Bible.

One theory or symbol can be labeled the "ransom image." Humanity was seen as being held hostage by the devil until God paid the ransom demanded for our release with the life of Jesus.

Then there's the "surrogate image," with God acting as judge, pronouncing a death sentence on sinful humanity. But rather than humanity serving the sentence, the judge himself sends in Jesus, a substitute or surrogate, to take our place in front of the executioner.

Probably the best-known image, however, is the "sacrificial image." This concept is tied directly to the Hebrew sacrificial system. The holiest day of the year in Judaism, the Day of Atonement,

St. Nicholas', Midland, Texas

known as *Yom Kippur*, recalls the act of a temple priest sacrificing an unblemished lamb to God as an offering for all the people's sins. And as we heard last night in the reading from Exodus, at the Feast of the Passover the Jews remember how their ancestors, while serving as slaves in Egypt, were saved from oppression and the sting of death by placing the blood of a sacrificed lamb around their doorposts. To many of the early Christians, Jesus became the symbolic, "sacrificial lamb," removing our sins and protecting us from death.

All these images came about in the early Christian community as attempts to make sense of their master's horrid death, and it's easy to see how such images would develop. When human beings interpret something—whether it's written words or actions and events themselves—we do so through the lens of our own knowledge and experience. The early Christian's knowledge and experiences would certainly lean heavily on those types images and symbols.

But what about us today? When we bring our own knowledge and life experiences to the interpretation table, do these images still speak to us? Are they still effective in answering the question: "what's it all about?" Or do we force the event (the crucifixion of Jesus) to fit an image no longer relative to our world today—an image that no longer matches our current knowledge and experience?

Like the promoters of the new version of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, maybe we need to interpret the event with the aid of an updated image. Like the lyrics and music of the updated play, the scriptural words must stay the same, but the image they portray may need to be modernized if we're going to make sense out of it from the perspective of our current situation.

So, I suggest we look upon this event with a different image. It's not a new image, in fact, it's been around a long time, but it tends to be overshadowed by some of the others.

I think it's appropriate to call this the "love image," for its premise is that the death of Jesus was all about love. Actually, the life and death of Jesus portray the perfect image of love—love for God and love for our fellow human beings.

When Jesus spoke his dying words on the cross, "It is finished," he was speaking of the end of his earthly life, but also about the end of his mission in the world—his mission of telling people about the love of God for humanity and exemplifying it in his own life. It certainly wasn't an easy mission, but it was one Jesus took very seriously, one he never gave up on, no matter how difficult the situation became, and regardless of the consequences. Above all else in this world, Jesus fought to overcome evil with the love of God.

Is that not our mission as well? As Christians, are we not charged with the same responsibility, to overcome evil with the love of God? But like Jesus' mission, our mission is not easy. If we take it seriously, we will be on an uphill climb most of our life. It will be hard work and along the way we'll have some setbacks, some disappointments, and some loses.

On April 19th, we'll observe the 23rd anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing, the worst act of terrorism ever on US soil, until 9/11. And the next day, on April 20th, we'll observe the 19th anniversary of the awful massacre at Columbine High School. Thinking about all the terrorist

events that have taken place since then, by all sorts of people, in what seems to be an ever-increasing frequency, is enough to make anyone sick.

Why did those events happen? Why would a loving God allow such heinous acts to be carried out? What purpose did they serve? “What’s it all about?”

There are no concrete, easy answers to those questions—questions most of us, I’m sure, have asked. But, as I’ve touched on several times this Lent, I cannot believe our loving God, the heavenly father of Jesus the Christ, the God in whose image we are made, would cause those awful events to take place. It was not God’s intention that all those innocent people should die, and that countless numbers of friends and relatives should suffer their loss. Rather, those acts were the result of evil in this world—evil that exists because of the freedom God built into creation. And it is that evil that we’re called upon to combat. That was Jesus’ mission! And that’s our mission as well.

The senseless murder of friends and loved ones should propel us even further in our quest to overcome evil with God’s love. And I think we’ve seen that exemplified repeatedly in the wake of such disasters. I remember quite well a television interview with the father of the girl who was shot in Columbine High School after answering the killer’s question that, yes, she was a Christian. I found it interesting that her father was insistent that his daughter not be remembered only for her dying words. He said she was never the type to carry her Bible to school and continually quote scripture verses to everyone. Instead, she was the type who lived her faith. Long before that fatal day, she had been a living example of God’s love in the world. She lived to fulfill her mission—telling people about, and exemplifying in her own life, the love of God for humanity. And, in her death, her father experienced a newfound strength to tour the country, on behalf of his daughter, speaking to others about the love of God—living out his mission in life, just as his daughter had done.

I heard a story once about Joseph Ton, a Christian pastor in Romania during its dark days under communism. He was arrested by the secret police for distributing one of his sermons that called for all Romanian churches to refuse to give in to the demands of the government, which sought to control their ministries. When the pastor refused to publicly renounce his sermon, as the police insisted, the police officer said, quite arrogantly, “Aren’t you aware that I can use force against you?”

To which the pastor replied, “Sir, let me explain. You see, your supreme weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying. You know that my sermons are spread all over the country on tapes. When you kill me, I only sprinkle them with my blood. They will speak ten times louder after that, because everybody will say, ‘That preacher meant it because he sealed it with his blood.’ So, go on, sir, kill me. When you kill me, I win the supreme victory.” The police released him. They knew he was much less of a threat alive than dead.

The people responsible for the multitude of terrorist events across the globe do not understand the concept of martyrdom. The evil with which they are infected distorts the concept in their minds. The reality of the situation—the truth of the matter—is that the love of God, carried on by those who remained, turn those evil acts into an opportunity to spread God’s love in the world.

St. Nicholas’, Midland, Texas

It was not God's will that Jesus should die. It is not God's will that disasters occur. But it is God's will that, despite the evil, good—the love of God—will have the final say.

The Jewish authorities and the Romans officials of Jesus' day didn't understand the concept of martyrdom either. Like the secret police dealing with Pastor Ton, they saw the living Jesus as a threat to their current ways. But unlike the secret police, they decided that killing Jesus would solve all their problems. And it did ... at least for three days.