

Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church-Unitarian Universalist
The Death of Jesus: Who is to Blame?
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April 5, 2009

Reading:

One of the stories about the death of Jesus comes from the book, The Last Temptation of Christ by Kazinsakas. The author, influenced by the gospels, places the blame on the Jewish people. He says Pilate wanted to wash his hands of Jesus' death. Pilate says,

“I wash and rinse my hands. It is not I who spill his blood, I am innocent. May the sin fall on you!”
“Take him,” Pilate said, “and don't bother me any more!”

They seized him loaded the cross on his back, spit at him, beat him, and kicked him toward Golgotha. The cross was heavy. Staggering, he looked about him. Perhaps he would discover one of the disciples. . .He looked and looked. No one. He sighed.

“Blessed is death,” he murmured. “Glory be to God!”

The disciples, meanwhile, had burrowed into Simon the Cyrenian's tavern. They were waiting for the crucifixion to be over the night to fall so that they could escape without being seen. Squatting behind the barrels, they listened with cocked ears to the happy throngs which passed by outside in the street. The whole city—men and women—had begun to run toward Golgotha. The people had enjoyed a fine Passover, had even more than enough meat, drunk more than enough wine; and now here was the crucifixion to while away their time. (p. 430)

Introduction

In the coming week many sermons will be preached about the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. This morning I would like to talk about what preceded that event. I will look to the academics for help in this endeavor. First, we must assume that Jesus lived, had a small following of Jews, was crucified, dead and buried. What happens after that is debatable, but the trial and death are more clear.

You all remember the film, The Passion of the Christ, produced by Mel Gibson. This film and many passion plays and films of the past, which focused on the suffering of Christ, have sowed the seeds for anti-Semitism. The purpose of this sermon is to give a more historical perspective on these events.

Preceding the opening of The Passion of the Christ, I lived in Cincinnati and had the opportunity to talk with one of the New Testament scholars, Dr. Michael Cook a professor of Jewish/Christian Studies at Hebrew Union College, who was asked to read the script and critique it before its release. Mel Gibson sent the script to many scholars and asked for their critique. All of the scholars who were asked to do so, critiqued the film as inaccurate. Their views were ignored, and they were prevented from attending the previewing of the movie.

Dr. Cook was clearly upset by the film and Gibson's treatment of the scholars. He feared a resurgence of anti-Semitism. The purpose in my sermon today is to look at the historical facts with the goal of reaching a balanced view of the death of Jesus of Nazareth.

Crucifixion

I will begin with the tradition of crucifixion in Roman culture during Jesus' life. Capital punishment, as much as I disagree with it, is much more humane than in the first century. Milo Connick writes:

Crucifixion had been practiced by the Roman since the Punic Wars of the third and second centuries. B.C. It was a punishment for rebels, slaves, and criminals of the lowest classes. Roman citizens were exempt from its torture. It was customary to crucify prisoners in groups. The method of execution varied in details, but the general procedure is clear. The condemned person was first scourged (whipped severely), a brutally painful experience in itself. As part of his punishment he was forced to carry the heavy crossbeam (*patibulum*), which weighed about eighty or ninety pounds, to the place of execution.

The place of execution was as public as possible, usually by some well-traveled road. It thus served as a grim warning to witnesses not to provoke “the governing authorities” (Rom.

13:1). When the condemned reached his destination, he was stripped of his clothing. His hands were nailed or tied to the ends of the crossbeam. Then he was lifted up and fastened to a permanent upright pole or post. His body was supported on the pole by a block, his legs were lashed out in an unnatural position, and his feet were nailed or his ankles tied to the upright post so that they were a few inches off the ground. Exposure, loss of blood, maltreatment by sadistic spectators, torture by insects, and impaired circulation caused excruciating pain. Death was normally welcomed as a friend after about twelve hours, but men sometimes suffered for much longer periods. . . .

A placard made of wood and covered with white gypsum was either hung around the criminal's neck or carried before him to the place of execution. On it was written in black the crimes so that all might know why he had to die. At the place of crucifixion, the placard was affixed to the upright pole above the victim's head.

What passion plays and films often do is focus on a particular gospel writer's account of the crucifixion. What they ignore is the fact that the gospels are not unified in their accounts. The Gospels were written after 64 CE, the year of Roman persecution under Emperor Nero. The Gospel writers were wary of such persecution and wanted to show that Jesus was not a rebel, but a peaceful man, loyal to Rome, therefore the emphasis on problems with Jews. Dr. Michael Cook concludes:

- The intensity of Gospel denunciations of Jewish leaders is most plausibly ascribed to the period well-after Jesus' death—when Christianity's attitude toward recalcitrant Jews had become suffused with rancor.
- The Gospels thereby cast Rome and Christians as allies with the Jews as the common enemy of both.

Dr. Cook's view of these events and the gospel accounts is summarized by a quote. He said, "Jesus was a Jew, put to death by Rome, transformed into a Christian, and put to death by Jews." If you get nothing else from this sermon, I hope you will remember this line. "Jesus was a Jew, put to death by Rome, transformed into a Christian, and put to death by Jews." I hope to fill in some of the blanks assumed by this quote.

Gospels

Lets look at the gospels. They differ about the time of Jesus' death. According to Mark, it was nine o'clock in the morning when Jesus was crucified. John says it was about noon.

The inscription on the placard above Jesus' dead differ slightly in form from Gospel to Gospel, but its substance is the same: "The King of the Jews." (Mk 15:26). John indicates that the inscription was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek, the languages of religion, empire, and culture, respectively (19:20). The charge was high treason.

As I read the Gospel stories, there is something about them that rings true to me: the lines that are attributed to Jesus upon his death. The gospel writers differ, but there is a reality to some of the quotes. They are:

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?
 Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.
 I thirst.
 It is finished.

Connick uses the Gospels to prove who is guilty of Jesus' death. He says the charge of treason "was a travesty of Jesus' mission and message, and it furnishes proof positive that he was tried, sentenced, and executed by the Romans."

It is a little more complicated than this. There is much that is not clear about Jesus' death. One thing is clear: He was not a popular figure, and he was probably a revolutionary. We often read about the robbers that were also crucified at the same time as Jesus. Josephus, the Jewish historian, says the word "robber" was a synonym for revolutionary.

We can also surmise that Jesus died a lonely man. Even his disciples abandoned him. People mocked him and ridiculed him. They said things like: “Aha! Who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!”

We can ultimately blame the Romans, but the Jews were not free of blame. The gospels say the chief priests mocked him, saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.” Scholars, including Michael Cook, question these facts, concluding they are the result of later Christianity trying to put the blame on the Jews. Connick writes, “aristocratic high priests would not have behaved so unseemly in public against a popular hero.”

This is not to deny the fact that Jesus caused concern in both the Jewish and the Roman communities. The Jews probably played a role in his arrest and interrogation. He then was turned over to the governor on a charge of political sedition. According to the gospels, at these proceedings the Jews put pressure on Pilate who was undecided. With the public sentiment, Pilate would be concerned about freeing a man charged with treason. Responding to the pressure, Pilate pronounced the death sentence and had it carried out by Roman soldiers.

Conclusions

So what can we conclude? Who is to blame for Jesus’ death? We must finally conclude that Jesus died at the hands of the Roman government. But this is not to say that Jesus pleased all the Jews. He was a Jew who challenged the ways of the Jewish priests. But he also had followers among the Jews. We cannot blame all the Jews for his arrest and charges of blasphemy, but only the Jews in power, the high priests. His movement was a minority movement among the Jews. His entry into Jerusalem and the cleansing of the temple were an open attack on the spiritual leaders of the Jewish people.

Some scholars theorize that he was a zealot who advocated open rebellion against Rome. The stories about Judas Iscariot, who wanted to overthrow Rome, are often used to support this view. According to these stories, when Jesus refused to declare himself the Messiah, Judas decided to turn him over to the chief priests, hoping he would then declare his Messiahship, win the support of the nation, drive the Romans into the Mediterranean. He never dreamed this would lead to the crucifixion. (Connick, New Testament, p. 367)

The problem with this point of view is that it is not supported by the message Jesus preached. His message of peace and love do not sound like the words of a rebel who wished to overthrow Rome.

Again, I ask, “Who is to blame?” It is the Roman government that allowed crucifixion. They called it treason, his claiming to be King of the Jews, or rebellion, the fact is they killed a man who challenged his times. It is a theme of the history of many religions. People killing people for what they preach and how they live.

We do not know that Jesus advocated an overthrow of the government. He did not advocate killing. He preached a message of peace, love, and forgiveness. It is ironic that he died for this message. Jesus died a lonely, scared, forsaken man. He even questioned his own faith that God was guiding his life and would be with him in death. This is what we know.

In conclusion, let us remember that Jesus was a Jew, and he died according to Roman law. Let us not blame the Jews for his death, but acknowledge there were those in power who cooperated with the Roman authorities when it fit their needs.

I conclude that there has been much too much emphasis on Jesus’ death and not enough on how he lived. Yes, let’s acknowledge that Jesus was a man who challenged the authorities of his day—religious and political. Like modern-day martyrs, he faced death because of how he lived, what he preached and how he lived.

We Unitarian Universalists live in the tradition of Jesus, and also our forebears who died for what they believed, what they preached and how they lived—the thousands of men and women who died during the Reformation for their beliefs and their religious practices. We also need to acknowledge modern-day martyrs, like Martin Luther King, Jr., James Reed, a UU minister, and Viola Liuzzo, a UU layperson, and others who responded to Dr. King’s call for help. This last summer we added two Unitarian Universalist martyrs to this list, when Greg McKendry and Linda Kraeger died in the Tennessee Valley UU Church in Knoxville, TN, by a gunman who could not accept a church who welcomed gays and lesbians among them.

I have never been obsessed with Jesus’ death anymore than I have of the life of other martyrs. What we should remember about a martyr is how they lived and not how they died. The reason Jesus is important is

because of the good he did, the challenges he made to the religion of his day. Many Jews were looking for a king or ruler, someone who would become the head of an army and overthrow the Roman government. Others wanted a Messiah, the Anointed One or Savior who was a representative of God on earth. Some called him the Son of God. Jesus did not claim any of these roles. He was a teacher, a lover of men, man who loved all people, even the harlot and the tax collector. He was the compassionate one.

What Mel Gibson overlooked by focusing on the suffering of Jesus is the important role that he played as a prophet and teacher. Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of the great teachers in our Unitarian Universalist history, said it this way:

Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished with its beauty, he lived in it, and had his being here.

The problem with organized religion is that often the human person in one life becomes the god of the next. Emerson continues:

Christianity became a Mythos, as the poetic teaching of Greece and of Egypt, before. He spoke of miracles; for he felt that human life is a miracle, and all that we do, and we knew that this daily miracle shines as the character ascends. But the word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain

Theodore Parker, a follower of Emerson, went on to say that pure Christianity is a simple thing. I quote:

It is absolute, pure morality. . . All this is very simple—a little child can understand it; Christianity, so well summed up in the commandment, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy god with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind—thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. . . (Epic of Unitarianism, Parke, p. 113)

This is the message of Jesus I would like for us to remember, not the events surrounding his death. Thank you. Amen and Blessed Be.