

**“PLOT AND COUNTERPLOT”**  
**John 18:1 – 19:42**  
**A Sermon by John Thomason**  
**Good Friday Ecumenical Service**  
**St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Woodbury**  
**April 2, 2021**

My younger daughter Beth is now 39 years old, but I can remember a conversation she and I had when she was about five as if it were only yesterday. It took place during Holy Week, and we were watching one of those cheesy, sentimentalized movies about the life of Jesus like “King of Kings” or “The Greatest Story Ever Told.” At one point during the scene of the crucifixion, Beth turned to me and asked, “Dad, why did Jesus die?” I would have preferred for her to ask me, “Where do babies come from?” That would have been an easier question to answer, even to a five-year old.

Christian thinkers and Good Friday worshipers have struggled for 2000 years to explain why Jesus died. Theologians, for their part, have resorted to various theories of the atonement, which turn the death of Jesus into a kind of transaction between heaven and earth. The most popular theory goes something like this. Human beings have disobeyed and offended a righteous God, and God demands justice. A penalty must be paid; but instead of requiring us to pay the penalty, “Jesus paid it all,” as the old gospel song says. When Jesus dies on the cross, the transaction is complete; human beings are off the hook and God is appeased. This, according to some theologians and many preachers, is why Jesus died.

Of course, my five-year old daughter wasn’t interested in any such theories. Her concerns were more practical and personal. She had watched this movie about a man who had gone about doing good but had ended up in a very bad way. It didn’t make sense to her mind; more than that, it broke her heart. Why would people kill someone who had never done harm to anyone else, someone who had loved God and other people to perfection? If anyone ever deserved to live, it was surely Jesus; so why did Jesus die?

To my way of thinking, when the question is put this way it’s much easier to answer. At one level, all we have to do is to look at the crucifixion through the eyes of historians. As many of them see it, history is a chronicle of human evil and cruelty; it is replete with instances where innocent people are falsely accused, suffer injustice, and die a premature death. The perpetrators invariably feel they are upholding a righteous cause – you know, the power of the empire, the pecking order of the economy, the status quo of social arrangements, even the orthodoxy of religion. The victims maintain that they embody a higher righteousness – qualities like compassion and mercy, justice and peace. But these qualities are a threat to the existing state of affairs, so those who hold power conspire to silence those who speak in a different voice. And there is no silence so complete and permanent as the silence of death.

The Gospel writers make it clear that the death of Jesus falls into this category. The Evangelists don’t indulge in fanciful “conspiracy theories”; they see Jesus as the victim of a real conspiracy. Jesus is a genuinely righteous man except to those who are self-righteous – in particular, the puffed-up religious leaders and the prideful Romans. When they perceive Jesus to be a threat to the hallowed establishment, they start plotting against him. They accuse him of

blasphemy and treason; they are anxious about his sway over the masses; they fear a violent insurrection. And the only way they know to prevent such violence is to do violence against the potential instigator. The plot against Jesus is fueled by jealousy and insecurity, paranoia and panic; and the plot thickens until it leads to the only place it can lead – the Place of the Skull. As seen through the eyes of historians, the thirst for blood – even innocent blood – is why Jesus died.

The Gospel writers are themselves historians, up to a point. They trace the plot to kill Jesus with the attention to detail of good detectives. However, they view this event in history with another set of eyes – the eyes of faith. Alongside this human plot to put Jesus to death, they recognize a divine counterplot. As contradictory as it might seem, God has a hand in Jesus' crucifixion. The cross is not just a plan hatched by evil human beings; it's part of a divine plan, a strategy for healing the very brokenness that the cross illustrates – a brokenness, I might add, in which you and I share.

So, if we want to know why Jesus died, the biblical answer is really two-fold. In the synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – Jesus is portrayed as an innocent victim. The authorities are out to get him, and they end up getting him, plain and simple. But in John, the Gospel we are reading tonight, Jesus is more of an agent than a victim. He knows that God is up to something in these tragic events, and he dies willingly in obedience to God. Jesus is ready to go that far to identify with our suffering, absorb our sin, and reveal the everlasting mercy of God.

For a Lenten study, our church has been reading a book by a Methodist pastor and author named Adam Hamilton. The book reflects on the 7 last words of Christ from the cross. When he discusses the sixth word, “It is finished,” which appears in tonight's Gospel reading, he comments that “Jesus' death is more like a sermon than a transaction.” By this, he means that the significance of Christ's crucifixion can't be reduced to a theory or a formula. “The cross,” Hamilton says, “is not math or science; it is poetry lived out in human flesh. The cross is a divine drama in which God through Jesus is revealing the darkness of the human soul and the relentless grace and love of God for the human race. It is a sculpture that when seen from one angle is so horrible and repulsive you can hardly stand to look at it, but when viewed from another angle is so beautiful you cannot help falling to your knees in utter amazement. It is a masterpiece in which the Artist has painted at one and the same time a self-portrait revealing [God's own] character and a portrait of you – your need for mercy and [God's] willingness to offer it to you. It is a love story that moves you to tears – one that begs to be read again and again.”

And so, here we are tonight reading it again, perhaps seeking an answer to the question, “Why did Jesus die?” The answer, as it turns out, is in the eye of the beholder. Seen through the eyes of historians, the answer is damning; but seen through the eyes of the faithful, the answer is reassuring. The human plot to get rid of Jesus is met and overcome by a divine counterplot. This is what turns a truly bad Friday into a “Good Friday.” I wish I had thought of that answer 34 years ago; it's something that even a five-year old could understand.