

Sermon for Tuesday in Holy Week  
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas

March 30, 2010  
 Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Isaiah 49:1-7  
 Psalm 71:1-14

1 Corinthians 1:18-31  
 John 12:20-36

### The foolishness of the cross

*The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Corinthians 1:18)*

Tonight's Gospel passage comes immediately after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The mood in the city was tense, excited, on edge. Passover was at hand, and Jewish crowds, chafing under the rule of the Roman Empire, had gathered to celebrate the memory of liberation from the Egyptian Empire. Riots against the Roman Empire sometimes broke out during Passover, and some commentators describe Passover as being "tinderbox time."<sup>1</sup> That year noisy crowds were coming out to meet Jesus, eager to see the man who had raised Lazarus from the dead, and who had just entered Jerusalem to confront Roman imperial authority and the religious leaders that were collaborating with it. Would he lead a political revolt? Would he call the Jewish people to arms and initiate a violent rebellion? Suspense was high. The authorities were alarmed, and set into motion the plot to kill him.

It is in this complex atmosphere of celebration, intrigue, and plotting that we hear tonight's reading. Some unnamed Greeks have come to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. They approach Philip to say, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" [John 12:21]. Philip tells Andrew, and the two of them report the message to Jesus, who exclaims, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" [John 12:23]. It seems that Jesus has received at last the sign that he was looking for, the signal from God that the decisive "hour" has arrived. It is the hour of what he calls his "glorification," but Jesus' idea of glory is clearly not like our idea of glory. As preacher Barry Vaughn puts it, "For Jesus, to be glorified was to embrace the cross, the epitome of suffering...Because non-Jews such as the Greeks were

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, "Collision Course: Jesus' Final Week," *Christian Century*, March 20, 2007, p. 29. The article is based on their book, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2006.

seeking to meet Jesus, he knew that his mission was no longer restricted to Israel but had become universal. It was time for him to be lifted up – that is, crucified – so that all people could be drawn to him.”<sup>2</sup>

Tonight with Jesus we look ahead to the cross.

“Oh, but what *foolishness!*” the world will tell us, as it once told him. “Arm yourselves! Fight fire with fire! Call down the armies of heaven and wipe out evil from the face of the earth!” But Jesus’ response to oppression and violence is not to wield a sword or raise a fist. His response to violence is not to retaliate or to seek revenge, but to absorb it, endure it, and transform it in his own body. To words of hate he replies with words of forgiveness. To acts of violence he responds with acts of suffering love. To the power-driven evil and oppression of the world, he responds by being lifted up on the cross.

I want to make something clear that is not always made clear during Holy Week. Jesus did not value suffering for its own sake, as if suffering were somehow intrinsically virtuous or ennobling. Jesus was not a masochist. There are scenes in all four Gospels when Jesus deliberately avoided attack. In John’s Gospel, the one from which we read tonight, Jesus sometimes steered clear of trouble by traveling in secret [John 7:10; 11:54], and during a visit to the temple he hid from an angry crowd that was about to throw stones at him [John 8:59]. Today’s passage ends with his removing himself from public view and hiding with his disciples until the night of the Last Supper [John 12:36b].

Jesus did not seek out suffering, but kept his inward vision fixed on God. He listened intently for what divine Love was calling him to do, and, as we heard in tonight’s Gospel passage, at last the hour did come when the only and best and truest way to stand up to the powers-that-be, the only and best and truest way to drive out “the ruler of this world” [John 12:31] -- that is, Satan and the powers of evil -- was to give himself in love, to offer his life freely on the cross.

As Richard Rohr, the Roman Catholic writer and priest, often remarks, when it comes to suffering, we either transmit it or transform it. We transmit suffering when we pass it along to other people, when we retaliate, seek revenge, and take an eye for an eye. We transform suffering when we find a creative, non-violent

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<sup>2</sup> Rev. Dr. J. Barry Vaughn,  
[http://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermons\\_that\\_work\\_106304\\_ENG\\_HTM.htm](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermons_that_work_106304_ENG_HTM.htm) March 29, 2009 – Fifth Sunday in Lent

response to it, when we find a way, through God's grace, to follow Jesus and to bear the cross with love and an open heart. It takes strength to transform suffering, and we need God's help to do it. When we transform our suffering, we receive power to reach out in love, when love seemed impossible -- power to forgive, when forgiveness seemed impossible -- power to feel and express compassion, when so much within us wanted only to close down . As Wendell Berry puts it so beautifully, "the Christian Gospel is a summons to peace, calling for justice beyond anger, mercy beyond justice, forgiveness beyond mercy, love beyond forgiveness."<sup>3</sup>

Where in your own life have you found a way to transform your suffering?

Where do you transmit suffering? Where do you need to ask Jesus to help you follow more faithfully in the way of the cross, which is foolishness in the eyes of the world, but which to us reveals the power of God?

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<sup>3</sup> Wendell Berry, "A Citizen's Response to the National Security Strategy of the United States of America," *Orion* 22 (March/April 2003), p. 26, quoted by John Gatta, *Making Nature Sacred: Literature, Religion, and Environment in America from the Puritans to the Present*, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 206.