

Exposing Beauty

The Violating Evil of the Cross and the Redeeming Beauty of GOD

Mark 14:26-15:47

Good Friday

The Sign

The sign:

“The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard.”

Then the approach:

“Rabbi!”

And the kiss. Perhaps the most famous kiss in human history. Not a lovers' kiss or a wedding kiss; the Judas Kiss.

The betrayal comes, not with cool distance or convicted shouts of “I hate you!” but with a kiss.

The Kiss

The first proto-Christians would exchange the Kiss of Peace. These people, in the decades after the crucifixion would gather together, in a person's home for worship. Long before there was canonical scripture, gathering to hear their version of events, and in the midst of worship they would confess and they would greet each other, not with a handshake, but a kiss.

A kiss is so much more intimate, so much more difficult to pull off, isn't it? Are any of us *truly* close enough here that we'd kiss each other? Not in a creepy or a forward way, of course. But in a brotherly and sisterly way. The way I kiss my son and daughter goodnight. The way I kiss my mother on the cheek when it has been way too long since I've seen her or when I'm saying goodbye again.

Those first followers, long before they called themselves Christians, heard Jesus's teachings as telling them to share in that kind of intimacy: to love each other enough to kiss each other. To fix their problems and get back together. With a kiss.

Judas

That Judas kisses Jesus, that Judas *uses the kiss* as the sign, as the mark of his betrayal, is powerful and jaw-dropping. It is as insulting and heartbreaking a moment as possible. Their closeness, Jesus's vulnerability, is thrown back at him.

Little wonder Christians have hated Judas for two thousand years. His betrayal is biting.

But Jesus doesn't hate Judas. Neither does the writer of Mark. He continues to call Judas "one of the Twelve". Judas is a member until the end. The other gospels play this differently, of course. But to the writer of Mark, Judas remains a disciple, even after his betrayal.

As a disciple, then, we can understand betrayal. We can know our own betrayals, our own failings and the way we've hurt people we love. The way we've used our strength, and their weakness, against them. How we've destroyed people, exploited people. Friends, enemies: neighbors both.

The Cross

Jesus knew his fate, we know. He spoke of his death on the cross. His march to Jerusalem mirrors the march to Golgotha.

Historians explain that Jesus probably didn't carry the whole cross, just the cross piece. The posts, tall, would be in the ground already. And when they arrive at the site, they will be affixed, attached, raised, and left to hang there.

Jewish wisdom called anyone hanged from a tree to be cursed. From early on, they compared the cross to a tree.

For many Christians, we compare those hanged from a tree to the one hanged from a cross.

The death would be long to come, ordinarily. The body left out to be picked at by animals. Jesus's death was swift and merciful. His being removed for the Passover protected his body.

The cross is gruesome and vile. It is torture. It is what frightened imperialists do to their enemies. It is what ugly, blackened souls do to torture the weak, the captive.

The visibility of the cross, just outside of town, up a hill, visible by the people in Jerusalem and by those coming into town was violatingly open. The perfect way to intimidate. Humiliate.

A man betrayed, intimacy exploited, stripped naked, beaten, humiliated. We'd understand if Jesus came down from the cross during the mocking, when they tempt him to show off his power, like Satan. Or if his return later was for vengeance. None of us would fault him. That's what we'd probably do. I suppose

that's really the problem, isn't it? It *is* what we'd do. But not what Jesus would. Or did.

Visions of Evil

Christians have spent centuries trying to describe what it is that happened here. I mean, not *literally what happened*, but what the purpose was. Why it happened this way. Cosmically. It is pretty clear why it literally happened. Jesus's message of peace and justice was too troubling, rebellious.

Our own need for violence and retribution are so strong, its pathological.

But in our sorrow and our own humiliation, we miss the sad beauty of Jesus's sacrifice. We are dragged each year through the muck, through disturbing waste of human destructiveness, through the vision of pure evil. People killing people. And we shed our tears and we say *isn't it a shame*. Then we race to Easter. We race to the happy.

But the evil is only found in the tragedy, in the violence. In the fear. In the abuse. It is found in the mocking and in the punishment. It isn't found in the crowds, in the people who love him. It isn't found in the disciples or the peasants or the pilgrims coming to Jerusalem for the Passover. Just Rome and its soldiers. Just the Temple leadership in their jealousy. Those are crowds demanding Jesus's death. The violent and the afraid.

But not in Jesus. No evil in Jesus. Just good.

Beautiful

The ugliness is the brutality, not the day itself: it isn't ugly. Not the sacrifice. Not what Jesus does in showing off the destructiveness of our obsession with power. Walking to his death defiantly humble, leaving Jerusalem displaying the same character with which he entered.

In trying to mock Jesus and destroy him; to decimate his followers and his influence, stripping him naked and exposing him for all to see, Rome showed their own flaws to the world, *their* weakness.

We're reminded of the teaching of turning the other cheek and the one that follows it. When Jesus says that if someone sues you for your coat, give him your cloak as well. Let *him* be ashamed for exposing your nakedness. For *his* doing that to *you*.

Jesus displays the rebellious character they hope to eliminate: even in death, even in the lowest moment. Jesus turns the ugliest instrument of torture and turns it into a vehicle that reveals GOD's beauty. That shows what true power looks like.

Today, Jesus leaves us with his parting message to keep going and his constant reassurance: Do not be afraid. He will be with us.