

The Cup Not Passed
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March 20, 2008 — Maundy Thursday
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Matthew 26.36-46 (NRSV)

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.” And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.” Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Again he went away for the second time and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.”

Introduction

This week we are reflecting on a variety of contemporary religious art. I think the painting that challenged me and disturbed me and moved me the most is the one by an American artist named John Barron — “Please Take This Cup Away from Me.”

About his painting, Mr. Barron wrote: “To me, this moment epitomizes the human side of Jesus. He is in absolute spiritual and emotional torment, alone and afraid. He is truly a man of deep sorrows. Knowing what lies ahead and terrified, he cries out to his Father to let this thing pass away from him. Yet in his moment of utter weakness and despair, Jesus’ love for his Father overcomes his own despondency, and he freely chooses, ‘Nevertheless, thy will be done.’ I always imagine God the Father at this point reaching out through tears of love, embracing, holding, caressing, and strengthening his only begotten Son.”¹

Jesus asked that the cup of suffering pass him by. It did not. That may be the deepest mystery of all in this week most holy. In reflecting on that mystery I want to talk about the danger and the blessing.

The Danger and the Blessing

First, there is a danger in this painting and in how we read the story of Jesus praying in the garden on that Thursday night long ago. This danger constantly threatens us with heresy and unfaithfulness. The danger is that we end up, first, thinking in terms of and, therefore, believing in terms of two gods or three gods but not One God. The danger is in our artwork. Not just in this painting, of course, but in uncountable thousands of artistic expressions. There is God the Father and there is God the Son. There is the divine God and the human Jesus. There are artistic

¹ John Barron, online, www.christianitytoday.com/ct/special/calvary/3.3.htm, Internet, 24 Aug. 2007.

renderings also of God the Spirit. I can't tell if Mr. Barron thought of the Spirit being represented in this painting but it's possible that some of the amorphous forms could suggest the Holy Spirit. Two gods. Sometimes three gods.

But the danger isn't just artistic. It's in our language. We speak often and necessarily of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. We baptize with the threefold name of God. I mentioned last night the apostolic benediction. It also uses the threefold name of God. And even though we say that God is Three in One and One in Three, our language betrays us and endangers us. So even when we try not to, we end up with mental pictures of multi-gods and in doing so we violate the most fundamental commandment: the Lord our God is One!

Even more dangerously, we take our multi-gods image and divide the character of god. So we have an Old Testament god of wrath and judgment and the New Testament god — Jesus — who is merciful and kind. We have an angry, vengeful god in heaven who demands the death of his only son. It sounds cruel, even abusive. In fact there are theologians who are trying to grapple with all of this and they argue that these images portray a god who is abusive of his child.² Of course, such comments twitter all manner of pious folk who condemn such thinking as blasphemous. It's not blasphemy. It's an attempt to take seriously how dangerous the images can be. If someone — if any of you — has been abused as a child, especially by a father, these images and ideas of God the Father and God the Son can stir up very deep and very disturbing emotions. There is danger here.

But within this mystery there is also blessing. To find it we cannot pull back from the text or shut our eyes to the art. We must move deeper into the mystery. We must keep holding in our minds that God is One. So Jesus' prayer in the garden takes us into the mystery of the Godhead, into the Tri-Unity of God. I mentioned last night how God has made us humans for community. We are made to belong to each other. I said last night it is the solemn mystery of this week most holy that Jesus suffered being cut off from the very human community he came to save, so that we might live in his community with him and all God's people forever. We are saved for community and we are made for community because we are made in God's image. Within the One God there is community. Our words cannot express it, our minds cannot understand, our eyes cannot see it. But perhaps our hearts can feel it. When Jesus asked that the cup of suffering pass him by and accepted that it would not, it was the inner agony of the One God embracing suffering — our suffering — that we might be loved and saved and brought within the very community of God.

Here's the blessing. The cup of suffering did not pass by Jesus so that the cup of blessing will not pass us by. It comes to us every time we come to this table. It is freely offered. There is nothing we need do to receive it but accept it in faith. And because the cup does not pass us by, we take into our very bodies the mystery of Jesus' prayer in the garden and the mystery of God's suffering love for us.

It was reported a couple of years ago that researchers at MIT had created a hi-tech wine glass that glows warmly when a distant partner picks up a paired wine glass and takes a sip. The glasses incorporate LEDs, liquid sensors, and wireless links. They could be anywhere in the world and you would get the feeling as if you were sharing a drink together. When one person picks up a glass it causes the loved one's wine glass to start glowing. When both partners put their wine glasses to their

² Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 55-56.

lips, both wine glasses glow even brighter.³ It is said that it creates the impression of being present one with the other.

The blessing is that our Lord needs no technology to be present with us. For in the cup that does not pass by us, and in the bread before, our God is with us and lets us take within ourselves the very mystery of his love.

Conclusion

Finally, the blessing is seen in what an ancient theologian once wrote: “What Jesus did not assume, he did not redeem.” Which means: if there is any part of human life that Jesus didn’t take into himself, then that part is left outside redemption. What he did not assume, he did not redeem. But in the mystery of the garden he assumed it all.

Have you ever been tempted? So was he. Your temptations have been redeemed in his. Have you ever been hated? So was he. You have a place in him. Have you ever been lonely, afraid, without a place to really call home? So was he. Have you ever had doubts not only about yourself but about God? Have you ever wept when you’re sad or afraid? So did he. So did he. You have a place in him.⁴ In him you are redeemed.

This night plunges us into a deep and even dangerous place. But if we stay with Jesus, there is blessing. Thanks be to God.

³ “Absence makes the glass glow fondly,” online, www.Reuters.com, Internet, 8 Mar. 2006, and also www.uberreview.com/2006/03/wi-fi-wine-glasses, Internet, 20 Mar. 2008

⁴ Richard Lischer, “He Was Forsaken,” www.goodpreacher.com, Internet, 25 March 2005.