

Who's to blame for Jesus' death?

By Bishop Paul V. Marshall

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I don't read the bible to determine what it might say to or about others.

Reading the stories of Jesus' betrayal, trial and execution is moving for me because it exposes the guilty one: me. If I want to pin the blame on anyone else, the story won't help me.

When I read of Peter's denial of Christ, I remember when I have not stood by friends because I feared social consequences.

When I read of Jesus before religious leaders, I recall when I have chosen the good of an institution over the need for justice.

When I read of Herod, I know when I wish religion to be a comfortable veneer.

When I read of Pilate, I know part of me concentrates on career issues.

When I read of the fickleness of the crowd, I see myself in a culture that does not really know what it wants.

Briefly, when I read about the death of Jesus, I see business as usual. I see how the system works. I see myself.

Why bother with these ugly reminders?

The central teaching of the New Testament is that when human nature did its worst, God's love still pursued us. In the death of Jesus I see consistent love; in the resurrection I see love vindicated.

To understand this story is to ask a question: When will the system stop doing its worst? Will we ever learn to see around us the opportunities to stop the killing? The story confronts us with a life or death choice for daily living. Do my day-to-day words and acts bring death or life to this world? It is costly to give up business as usual, but it will stop the killing.

One may ask how or why Christians believe in the continuing presence and power of a living Jesus Christ. I find intellectual debate about historical and theological issues least helpful: They are more about belief than faith and relationship. They are pointless if there is no living reality behind them.

Many paths have led people to Christ. I suggest three practical things one can do to discover whether Christ is alive in one's life, whether love has been vindicated.

(1) Set aside a period, perhaps 30 days, in which you behave as though Christ is there. That behavior begins with prayer: conversation, sharing life, offering concerns for the world's needs, listening for what guidance may come, what perceptions of people and relationships may change. Prayer, as Simone Weil suggests, is "absolutely unmixed attention."

(2) Alter your life to include service to the poor or needy... as quietly and directly as possible, a hands-on experience of serving Christ by serving others, looking for his face in theirs. Loss of self for others, especially in the middle of a "busy" life, is a way to meet the one who was crucified and whose love was vindicated..

(3) Be where faith already is. The weekly gathering of modern-day disciples for praise, prayer, scripture and sacrament is supplemented by fellowship and the chance to talk with those who are already on the journey. Like its cousins, Christianity is in both the short and long run about being part of a people, a people with identity and mission.

None of this comes as easy answer or quick fix. To find Christ, to discover love vindicated, is to go where he went and be where he is. Those places are not always attractive, but they are full of meaning and often bring joy.

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