

**The Death of Osama bin Laden**  
**Luke 24:13-35, Easter 3, Year A**  
**8 May 2011**  
**By The Reverend Barkley Thompson**

The first thing you notice is the whiteness of the nurse's uniform. Against the grey of the background, it's as vivid as fresh cotton. Her back is arched, and the small of it rests on the strong and broad hand of a sailor. She balances delicately on one leg, with the other kicked back at a forty-five degree angle. Her arm dangles at her side, revealing that it is the sailor's strength and not any effort of her own that keeps her standing. With one arm he holds her back, and with the other he cradles her neck. His cap is pushed back on his head, and he leans into her with passion.

We can't see either of their faces, because they are engaged in the most famous kiss of the 20th century. It is a celebratory kiss. We know this because of the ticker tape on the pavement and the expressions on the face of those in the background. All are cheering and smiling. In a sense, everyone in the scene is taking part in that kiss.

The date is August 14, 1945, Victory over Japan Day, when the Empire of Japan signaled its surrender to ultimately, finally, totally end the Second World War. When the war ended, people celebrated.

This past week people again celebrated. Spontaneous parties erupted outside the White House. On college campuses, people gathered in joyous abandon. The descriptor repeatedly used in the newspaper was "euphoria" at the death of Osama bin Laden.

In a few months we'll commemorate the tenth anniversary of September 11, 2001. That day affected me as much as many, though I'm sure less than some. I had no close personal friends in the Twin Towers that day. But I did know Sara Low, one of the flight attendants on American Airlines Flight 11 which collided with the North Tower. She was the sister of a college friend. I'd met her several times.

My college roommate had only just moved to Washington, D.C. a few weeks before the attack. It was Chris who called me early that morning as I was walking out the door to a seminary class and told me to turn on the television, just in time to see the second plane make impact. After the Pentagon was hit, Chris and I lost telephone contact, and I worried for him throughout that day and the next, until we were able to reconnect.

At Holy Apostles, I had a couple in the parish who had previously worked for a New York accounting firm based in the World Trade Center. Many of their friends and colleagues were killed on 9/11.

That was all a decade ago. In the interim our country has fought two wars. As a nation, we are conflicted over the motives for one of those wars and over the long lack of priority given the other. As a community, we pray for those we know and love who serve in uniform in harm's way even this very day. On doubting days we wonder if, and on sure days we believe, our expense of emotion and blood is making the United States safer in the world.

This decade-long burden we still bore on Sunday last, when the President of the United States interrupted our television viewing to tell us that Osama bin Laden had been killed. In the succeeding days, we have learned the stunning precision with which the Navy SEAL operation was carried out. In the process of eliminating Osama bin Laden, none of our soldiers and only one enemy noncombatant were killed.

As Christian people, how should we feel about such things, first about the execution and second about the subsequent celebrations? Undoubtedly, some cringe at broaching the topic at all. It seems dangerously close to mixing religion and politics. And yet, the saints of the Church have always asked such questions: Augustine, Martin Luther, Karl Barth, Martin Luther King, Jr. Jesus himself asked such questions. If our faith is to be more than merely a Sunday lozenge that soothes our scratchy souls, it must bear upon the way we walk through the world. And so, the questions must be asked and answers must be attempted.

Our first instinct will be to answer them through our emotional lenses, our need for closure, and our fear of an enemy who lurks in shadow. That instinct is natural and human, but we must in humility acknowledge that it is not *Christian*. In today's Gospel reading—the Walk to Emmaus, which we read every year on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter—we find two disciples of Jesus who are also at an emotional pitch. Their teacher has been killed, but now his body has disappeared, denying them closure. They fear the powers who killed him. They share these concerns with the stranger who walks with them on the road, but they remain so confused that they don't recognize who he is or what he tells them in return. Only when he sits with them and enacts Eucharist—taking bread, blessing it, breaking it, and giving it to them—are their eyes opened. Only then do they recognize the stranger as Jesus and understand his teaching.

This is a crucial point for us, and this is what it means: The bread symbolizes Jesus himself. He is broken for us, and only with our eyes open to that sacrifice can we understand how we are to respond to events in the world. Apart from the Gospel of Jesus, we are bound to respond wrongly.

First, the execution of bin Laden itself. St. Paul tells us in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans that the governing authority is the agent of God “to execute wrath on the wrongdoer.”

Perhaps no Christian has wrestled with what this means so much as Martin Luther. Luther said if we lived in a world where everyone followed the teaching of Jesus—where everyone lived as a Christian rather than merely claiming to be Christian—we'd have no need for authority that bears a sword. But we do not live in such a world. We live in a world in which the power of evil causes people, in Luther's words, to "devour one another." In such a world, we must live with the paradox that sometimes the sword is necessary "to bring about peace and prevent evil deeds."

Martin Luther believed that no Christian should take up the sword in self-defense, but "*for another* he can and ought to wield [the sword] and invoke it, so that wickedness may be hindered" and "evil and injustice" punished.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, to end what we rightly can call the evil work of Osama bin Laden, which not only led to the deaths of 3,000 American civilians a decade ago but also the deaths of thousands more people across the globe over the years, we can say that the execution of bin Laden was just, and perhaps even faithful.

But what of the celebrations? They strike me as different in kind to those celebrations in Times Square and elsewhere at the end of World War II. Those events, both spontaneous and planned, were in essence celebrations of life. In other words, no one cheered the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima. Rather, what caused the euphoria in those days was the realization that *no more lives would be lost*, either ours or those of our enemies. War was ending. Light had overcome darkness.

This week, though, the celebrations have been focused not upon the end of a conflict or the saving of lives (although we can hope that both of these may ultimately result from last Sunday's event). The celebrations have focused upon the fact of a man's death. An enemy's death and a necessary death to be sure, but a death all the same. And the wild abandon, the chanting and slogans, have seemed more apt for the ending of a football game. What would be the Christian argument against such celebration in this case?

There is an ancient Jewish midrash that says when the Israelites escaped the Red Sea, and the sea collapsed on the Egyptians drowning them, the angels in heaven began to rejoice. They looked over at God, who sat in stony silence. Finally, God rebuked them with his tears saying, "These, too, were my children."

Elsewhere God says through the prophet Ezekiel, "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but would rather they turn from their ways and live."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes from Martin Luther's treatise, "Secular Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed."

In addition to commanding us to love our enemies, Jesus himself grieved for those who butchered him (*Can you imagine?*), begging God's forgiveness for the very men who nailed him to the cross, trading his own brokenness for the brokenness of the world in order to save it.

The death of any of God's children is cause for grief, especially when that death comes as the inevitable end of a life spent destroying other of God's beloved children, as the end of a *wasted* life.

Two weeks ago I stood at the base of the Washington Monument. To my right was the Capitol Building. In front of me was the White House. To my left was the Lincoln Memorial. And at my side were my children. It was awesome. Never was I more grateful to be an American citizen. As an American, I am relieved that Osama bin Laden is dead. Most likely people will live because he no longer does. Perhaps Americans will come home sooner because he is gone.

As a Christian, I will not whoop and cheer his death. I will—I hope *we* will—pray for this world in which men devour one another; pray for this world in which the sword is a necessary instrument of peace; pray that the authorities God grants the right to wield that sword use it with wisdom and justice; and pray for that day to end all days, when swords are unnecessary, terror unknown, and the love of God reigns in all people. *Amen.*

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<sup>2</sup> Ezekiel 18:23.