



Lent
DAILY DEVOTIONALS
Truth to Tell
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There are many ways to tell the story of what happened on Good Friday. According to John, it involved a collusion between religion and politics. While Pilate and the chief priests conspired to solve their mutual problem while managing to remain enemies, Jesus stood at the center of the stage like a mirror in which all those around him saw themselves clearly for who they were. One way we Christians have avoided seeing our own reflections in the mirror is to pretend that this is a story about Romans and Jews. As long as they remain the villains, then we are off the hook – or so we think. Unfortunately, this is not a story that happened long ago in a land far away.

Sons and daughters of God are killed in every generation. They have been killed in holy wars and inquisitions, concentration camps and prison cells. They have been killed in Cape Town, Memphis, El Salvador and Alabama. The charges against them have run the gamut, but treason and blasphemy have headed the list, just as it did for Jesus. He upset those in charge at the courthouse and the temple. He suggested they were not doing their jobs. He offered himself as a mirror they could see themselves in, and they were so appalled by what they saw that they smashed it. They smashed him every way they could. One of the many things this story tells us is that Jesus was not brought down by atheism and anarchy. He was brought down by law and order allied with religion, which is always a deadly mix. Beware those who claim to know the mind of God and who are prepared to use force, if necessary, to make others conform. Beware those who cannot tell God's will from their own. Temple police are always a bad sign. When chaplains start wearing guns and hanging out at the sheriff's office, watch out. Someone is about to have no king but Caesar.

This is a story that can happen anywhere at any time, and we are as likely to be the perpetrators as the victims. I doubt that many of us will end up playing Annas, Caiaphas or Pilate, however. They may have been the ones who gave Jesus the death sentence, but a large part of him had already died before they ever go to him – the part Judas killed off, the Peter, then all those who fled. Those are the roles with our names on them – not the enemies but the friends.

Whenever someone famous gets in trouble, that is one of the first things the press focuses on. What do his friends do? Do they support him or do they tell reporters that, unfortunately, they had seen trouble coming for some time? One of the worst things a friend can say is what Peter said. We weren't friends, exactly. Acquaintances might be a better word. Actually, we just worked together. For the same company, I mean. Not together, just near each other. My desk was near his. I really don't know him at all.

No one knows what Judas said. In John's Gospel he does not say a word, but where he stands says it all. After he has led some 200 Roman soldiers and the temple police to the secret garden where Jesus is praying, Judas stands with the militia. Even when Jesus comes forward to identify himself, Judas does not budge. He is on the side with the weapons and the handcuffs, and he intends to stay there.

Or maybe it was not his own safety that motivated him. Maybe he just fell out of love with Jesus. That happens sometimes. One day you think someone is wonderful and the next day he says or does something that makes you think twice. He reminds you of the difference between the two of you and you start hating him for that – for the difference – enough to begin thinking of some way to hurt him back.

I remember being at a retreat once where the leader asked us to think of someone who represented Christ in our lives. When it came time to share our answers, one woman stood up and said, "I had to think hard about that one. I kept thinking, Who is it who told me the truth about myself so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?" According to John, Jesus dies because he told the truth to everyone he met. He was the truth, a perfect mirror in which people saw themselves in God's own light.

What happened then goes on happening now. In the presence of his integrity, our own pretense is exposed. In the presence of his constancy, our cowardice is brought to light. In the presence of his fierce love for God and for us, our own hardness of heart is revealed. Take him out of the room and all those things become relative. I am not that much worse than you are nor you than I, but leave him in the room and there is no room to hide. He is the light of the world. In his presences, people either fall down to worship him or do everything they can to extinguish his light.

A cross and nails are not always necessary. There are a thousand ways to kill him, some of them as obvious as choosing where you will stand when the showdown comes along, others of them as subtle as keeping your mouth shut when someone asks you if you know him.

Today, while he dies, do not turn away. Make yourself look in the mirror. Today no one gets away without being shamed by his beauty. Today no one flees without being laid bare by his light.