

Good Friday Year A

Let Your Idols Fall

[RCL] Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10:16-25 or 4:14-16, 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42

This is really not a day for words. When we grieve, all words are too much.

It is much better for us to take in the facts about how Jesus was treated: the injustice, the spiritual blindness, the narrow thinking, the positioning for power. It is better that we just sit with that grief and blackness, make a space inside of ourselves for the death of Jesus; and just abide in it.

We must abide with Good Friday, not because it leads quickly to the empty tomb, but because Jesus did die. It is better that we not fill it with too many words and instead marvel at this death and consider our part in it.

In this lengthy Passion narrative from the gospel of John we are not spared any detail. There is a great deal here but the scene when Pilate asks the chief priests if he shall crucify their king is very interesting. The priests answer, “We have no king but the emperor.”

Here we see that the powers-that-be have no compunction with violating their very identities to get what they want. Two things are happening here and both have to do with idolatry.

The first thing that is happening is that the priests are telling the Empire, manifest in Pilate, that their only king is the emperor. This is in direct violation of God’s explicit dislike of kings. Hundreds of years prior to this scene the people of Israel had asked God for kings so that they can be like the other people in the region.

God warned them then that kings would take their sons for soldiers, tax them to death, and all the other things that come with human kings. God’s desire was that he would be their king; that is what would have distinguished them from the other people in the region. But when the people persisted God allowed kings to rise among the Israelites, provided they carried God’s anointing.

God, it seems, is in the habit of taking a bad situation and improvising some good out of it. But today, in this passage from John, these priests are denying God’s choice for a king and they are putting their faith in the Roman Emperor so that they can make the political alliance necessary for the assassination of their enemy Jesus.

Along with this political posturing is the fact that since the chief priests have allied themselves with the Emperor for their peace and security, they have replaced God with the Emperor. This is idolatry. Idolatry is when a created thing is put in place of the uncreated source of life and love. Idolatry is when

we find our security, power, identity in anything other than God. The priests have committed the sin of idolatry.

Idolatry is the most pervasive and insidious of sins. If Good Friday teaches us anything it is that our notions of what God is and can do need to be cast down like the idols they are.

In the life of the spirit the casting down of personal idols usually follows a pattern. The first idol that needs casting down is the idol of things: thinking that the things that surround you make you a worthy person. You are not your things, our things do not give us worth. Only God gives us worth. That's why God is worshipped and things are not.

The next idol that needs casting down is the ego. You are not that great. You are also not all that bad either. Self-deprecation, too, is an activity of the ego. The ego: not the healthy bit that makes you a person, but the ego that manipulates people, things, and facts for your own purposes. This idol must come down.

In the life of the spirit these idols have been well within the bounds of good advice and general spirituality.

The next idols that need destruction are within the particular purview of the Abrahamic faiths, and, I think, are especially Christian.

The first of these idols is the idolatry of faith. The idolatry of faith is when we begin to use the story and beliefs of God to judge and separate others. This is when we carve in stone the stories of our tradition as reality to such a level that we lose sight that they are a chronicle of people's encounters with the God of love and turn the activity of faith into the judgement seat of faith, separating those who are in and those who are out. The idolatry of faith is broken by true faith, which is *trust*, trust the stories and traditions about God, they are not God themselves, but instead urge us into truth faith, pointing to God.

The next idol does not have a hold on everyone, but it is still a powerful idol.

This is the idol of doubt. This idol tells us that only doubt and suspicion of the stories of God can bring us closer to the true God. It is an idol that says, "If you would simply think like I think about God, then you will perceive the truth." None of us possess the full knowledge of the unknowable God, and some beliefs should be doubted, but when doubt becomes the enemy of faith instead of its steward, then it has become an idol.

The final idol that needs to come down is the hardest one of all, but it is the one that Good Friday most explicitly addresses: the idolatry of God. The idolatry of God means that we have set ideas of exactly what God is and can do. If I were to use an everyday word for the idolatry of God I suppose it would be expectation: high expectations, low expectations, horrible expectations, impossible expectations,

immature expectations.

When we destroy the idol of God we truly live by faith; living fully, as one moment unfolds from the last, trusting that God is with us in love, come what may.

In Good Friday we see our image of God literally killed. Good Friday, with the death of Jesus is an enactment of the death of all idols, including, most explicitly the idol of God.

God does not die. Messiahs do not die. Yet, Jesus does die, and in the death of Jesus the final idol is destroyed and in this death we are released from all idols and left with the present moment in Christ, redeemed and free.

This freedom is jarring, and it is appropriate that we commemorate the death of idols as we do today. Grieve for the loss of your idols.

Abide in stillness over the death of your graspings for anything other than God. Let your idols fall at the foot of the cross and sit awhile in death and grief, and wait.

Wait, because God has a surprise in store.

Amen.

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