

The suffering of Jesus and Others (Palm/Passion A) (Matthew 26: 14--27:66)

Matthew's writing is terse. This hasn't stopped some from imagining grimmer details.

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My childhood babysitters were from Albania and Vietnam, Ethiopia and Yugoslavia. The Albanians were young men, energetic and capable, ready to play and eager to please. The Ethiopians were in families, proud of their sparse apartments and adept at finding places where coffee could be brewed over an open fire away from smoke detectors. The Hmong were quiet, more proficient in English but less likely to speak. All of them bore scars, if not on their bodies than on their hearts and minds. But none of them ever talked about it, at least not to me.

They were all refugees. My mother's job was to encourage churches in our region to sponsor refugees for resettlement. Her coworkers, earlier arrivals, were mostly from Southeast Asia. During her tenure the people she would help came from Eastern Europe and North Africa. I knew their stories vaguely: hardship at home, midnight escapes, families left behind, years spent in camps waiting. But specifics were illusive.

Visiting the home of one of my mother's Cambodian colleagues, I once noticed a framed spoon above the mantelpiece. When I asked about it, our host said, "My wife smuggled that spoon into the reeducation camp so that she could feed our son. He would have died without that spoon." He paused and then added, "Many people did die." It was the first time I had an inkling there were harder stories behind our friends' smiles.

Matthew writes about Jesus' unjust conviction, torture, humiliation, and crucifixion. While the back and forth of the trial takes up the majority of the assigned reading, many Christians will focus on the more physical parts of the story. Matthew's writing is terse. The torture of Jesus takes place in a subclause: "after flogging him." His execution is more a description of time than of action: "and when they had crucified him.."

This hasn't stopped some from imagining grimmer details.

I have read descriptions of the process of flogging that will turn your stomach. I have heard pastors debate the location of nails on a crucified body. There are long chapters in books about blood and gore, suffering and pain. Mel Gibson's controversial film *The Passion of the Christ* focused on the torture and crucifixion of Jesus to the exclusion of other elements of the story. David Edelstein called it a "two hour snuff-movie." Roger Ebert wrote that it was "the most violent movie I have ever seen," yet, as a former altar boy, he thought the film aptly portrayed "the central event in Christian tradition." There are plenty of Christians that agree with him.

For some there is a theological reason to magnify Jesus' sufferings. Substitutionary atonement theory posits Jesus' torture and crucifixion as the punishment for the sin of the whole world. It follows that so much sin would result in the greatest pain imaginable, and the most terrible death. Our gratitude, and attempts to avoid sin, should therefore be all the greater, knowing how ultimately and how horribly Jesus suffered.

But what about those refugee men and women I knew? What of their families and friends left behind? What of their children who would grow up in a foreign land? The idea that Christ has suffered more than any other seemed disproven by their experiences. As I grew older and read the stories of dictators and wars, killing fields and concentration camps, rape and torture and genocide, it seemed to me that Jesus got off easy. After all, his trial, torture, and execution all took place over the course of days. I knew people who had suffered for years and for whom the burden of their experience lasted decades. And a God who would demand the same retribution as Po Pot, Hitler, Stalin, and Idi Amin did not seem like a God worth following at all.

Matthew does not dwell on Jesus' suffering and execution, and maybe neither should we this Passion Sunday. The Passion of Jesus, it turns out, is an all too familiar story of the suffering of people throughout the world. Matthew surely knew others who

had been tried unfairly, humiliated, tortured, and killed for their faith. He tells the story so simply, so matter-of-factly. He knew this suffering would not end with Jesus. It still goes on today.

Jesus suffers not because it is horribly rare but because it is horribly common.

Matthew writes that when Jesus dies, the earth shakes, rocks split, graves are opened, and the curtain in the temple is torn in two. Perhaps this is not heaven's response to the suffering and death of God but heaven's response to the suffering and death of human beings. Our God does not demand retribution like some dictator; our God mourns like a parent. And shouldn't we as well? Unjust trials should cause the earth to shake. Mockery should cause rocks to break. When people are tortured, tombs should be opened. And when the innocent are executed, our temple curtains ought to be torn in two.

The suffering and death of Jesus calls us from complacency. If we would confess that Jesus is Lord, then we must see in Jesus' story the untold story of so many others. If we would love Jesus, then we must love those who suffer now. We are all waiting for redemption and refuge in the arms of a loving God.