Holy irony: Matthew 26:14–27:66

At one end of Matthew, Jesus goes free. At the other, cruel, ritualized slaughter befalls him.

by Frederick A. Niedner in the March 11, 2008 issue

Matthew's Gospel has blood spattered all over it. The story opens "in the time of King Herod" (2:1), the tyrant about whom even the Romans joked, "Better Herod's *hus* than his *huios*" (luckier to be Herod's pig than one of his sons). Of the latter, nearly all died by their father's orders, lest any supplant him. The slaughter of Bethlehem's innocents, which roused ancient mother Rachel's mournful voice in Matthew's telling, would have barely raised eyebrows in Herod's Jerusalem.

The other end of Matthew's story proves equally bloody. There, the Immanuel child who escaped Herod falls victim to a new cadre of frightened leaders. His lifeblood mingles in the dust with that of all the others who died amid screams of horror. This time, however, the bloodshed changes everything.

At both ends of the story we find recognizable patterns to the spilling of blood. Herod practiced deadly arts of power and perfidy already quite ancient by his time. In his mind, only he could save Israel from vanishing beneath Rome's thumb, and the price of his gift to Jerusalem's churning cauldron of factions included just enough innocent blood to keep everyone afraid.

The king of the Jews who emerges in Matthew's final chapters uses his own lifeblood to save Israel. Here, too, ancient patterns appear. The ancient *haggadah* tells how lambs' blood on the Israelites' doorposts prompted the angel of death to pass by on the way to devastating some Egyptian home. Next morning, they walked.

This time, however, when Jesus shares the cup of Passover with friends, he says it holds his blood. Drink this, and my lifeblood becomes yours. Tomorrow I die, but you go free. Wherever you go, I am with you.

Matthew, alone among those who report Jesus' words, says this blood works the forgiveness of sins. If we follow the trail of blood and the language of forgiveness,

another ancient pattern becomes visible in Matthew. It begins with the angel's message to Joseph. "Name the child Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

Jesus already means "salvation" in Hebrew, but in Matthew's understanding, salvation in the time of King Herod must come for people who have done unspeakable things to one another. They need forgiveness and reconciliation, not merely freedom. Accordingly, at a crucial moment in Matthew, we find two Jesus figures. How odd to hear Pilate ask the crowds, "Which Jesus should I release for you, the one called Father's Son (*Bar-Abbas*), or the one called Messiah?"

One Jesus goes free, while cruel, ritualized slaughter befalls the other. His blood gets on everything. The patterns Pilate sees in these events prompt him to wash his hands of this blood. Later, the priests will rid themselves of blood-stained shekels thrown back at them.

The crowds had come for Passover, but also for the Day of Atonement, when the priests brought forward two identical male goats. One they would send away, never to be seen or heard from again. The other they slaughtered, then they sprinkled its blood all over the place. This blood atones for the sin and uncleanness of the people (Lev. 16).

In the holy irony of the gospel, the blood of forgiveness lands on the crowds who had spoken, even screamed with bloodlust against the Son of Man. Such talk can and will be forgiven, Jesus promised (Matt. 12:31-32). Here we see how.

Presumably the reach of that atoning blood extends to the hiding place of Peter, who also spoke against the Son of Man, as would many others later on when asked if they followed Jesus.

What about the other friend who handed Jesus over to the priests who needed a victim? He's lost to us now. We could have visited him, and with hard, patient talk handled the terrible fault line that now ran between us. Then two or three could have joined this conversation, and maybe the whole community. But not now, given the wrenching permanence that suicide piles atop betrayal.

What becomes of traitors, not only Judas but those in our congregations and communities, or the intimates who stab our families in the back? In what company do I rest in the dust after a lifetime of perpetrating large and small betrayals that

have cost others, including those I love, their joy, their sanity, their ability to trust, even their lifeblood?

In the common burial plot, that's where. In the Field of Blood, where to this day those who have no place, or who have forfeited every place among the living, rest in the promise of the shepherding God who never pauses until every lost one is found, even if the searching leads all the way to Sheol.

If you don't trust me, says Matthew, listen to Jeremiah, a traitor whose calling to hand his own people over to Babylon cost him terribly. Ruin, then restoration, was Judah's only hope, declared Jeremiah, and everyone despised him. He came to curse the day he was born (Jer. 20:8-18). But Jeremiah also bought a field in occupied territory, where Babylonian troops would soon spill the first river of blood that brought old Rachel wailing from her grave. It won't remain forever a place of desolation, Jeremiah promised. It's our field of hope (Jer. 32:1-15).

Remember these promises as you ponder the blood you've shed and the life you've wasted. We share life within the crowd whose faces are covered and whose clothing is soaked in the blood of atonement. We go free. Moreover, whatever plot of dust becomes our grave one day, we sleep among the hopeful strangers who rest in the Field of Blood.