Evil and Good Friday

by L. Gregory Jones in the April 12, 2000 issue

A pastor from South Africa was finishing his first year as a full-time pastor in the U.S. He had served churches in the two countries, so I asked him to compare the role of the church in the U.S. with its role in South Africa.

“I am still trying to come to terms,” he said, “with a culture where Mother’s Day and Father’s Day are more obligatory days of church attendance than is Good Friday.

“In South Africa,” he went on, “we have experienced so much suffering and evil that Good Friday is a pivotal day for us. We cannot understand the hope of Easter apart from confronting the pain and agony of Good Friday. But in America people come to church on Palm Sunday and again on Easter, with no services in between. Yet the church was packed on Mother’s Day!”

My friend was troubled not only that so few people attend church on Good Friday, but that U.S. churches and church-related institutions often do not consider Good Friday a holiday. Why is Good Friday so unimportant for mainstream Protestant Christianity in America?

My friend’s words haunt me, for they point to an impoverished set of cultural and ecclesial resources for grappling with evil. While in recent years many Americans have not had as much firsthand engagement with massive suffering and evil as have South Africans, we are aware of the images of massive horror within our own country and around the world: school shootings and other mass murders, racial violence, civil wars, and on it goes.

Yet we have difficulty naming and identifying, much less explaining, the significance of these events. We have lost the vocabulary for describing the realities we confront. As American cultural analyst Andrew Delbanco puts it in his provocative book *The Death of Satan*, “The repertoire of evil has never been richer. Yet never have our responses been so weak. We have no language for connecting our inner lives with the horrors that pass before our eyes in the outer world.” Why?

Delbanco proposes that we have undergone an extensive process of “unnaming evil,” a process that goes back at least a couple of centuries but which has “accelerated enormously” over the past 50 years. He traces the loss of the language of Satan, of evil and even of sin, from the American cultural vocabulary.

To be sure, Delbanco does not offer an oversimplified narrative. He describes diverse intellectual, cultural, social and theological forces that converge to diminish evil as a part of America’s imaginative vocabulary.

Delbanco believes that this process of “unnaming evil” has left us deeply troubled. “Despite the monstrous uses to which Satan has been put, I believe that our culture is now in crisis because evil remains an inescapable experience for all of us, while we no longer have a symbolic language for describing it.”

Delbanco offers a powerful analysis, yet I am troubled by one part of his conclusion: In what sense is evil an “inescapable experience for all of us”? Isn’t part of the problem that many modern Western people, Christians and non-Christians alike, have found it too easy to deny that evil is an experience for “me” or “us”? It is always somewhere else. People are exposed to massive horror through television and other media. But does such exposure do anything more than make us voyeurs of others’ suffering?

Could it be that our impoverished cultural and ecclesial resources conspire with modern media to make evil apparent but fundamentally unreal? Are we aware of evil’s reality yet blind to its force and effects, unable to name and describe it?

Obviously, South Africa’s experience of profound suffering and trauma gives rise to struggles for which the liturgy of Good Friday offers voice. So it is unsurprising that so many South African Christians are drawn to church on Good Friday. It expresses powerfully people’s concrete struggles with evil and suffering.

Yet the dynamic also works in the other direction. The Good Friday liturgy can shape and reshape our engagement with the reality of evil and provide a vocabulary for describing it. Good Friday confronts us with evil as an “inescapable experience for all of us.” We are compelled to reflect on evil as a reality that cuts through our own lives, our own hearts and minds, imaginations and actions. We ask ourselves, “Is it I, Lord?”

Further, Good Friday provides an opportunity to challenge the superficiality of American optimism that so easily turns into cynicism. It does so by inviting Christians to discover the profound hope of Easter that comes only on the far side of sin and evil, a hope that enables us to see the world and ourselves more truthfully and redemptively.

In Wallace Stegner's novel *Crossing to Safety*, two women visit a museum in Italy and see Piero della Francesca's resurrected Christ rising up from the tomb. The narrator describes the painting: "That gloomy, stricken face permitted no forgetful high spirits. It was not the face of a god reclaiming his suspended immortality, but the face of a man who until a moment ago had been thoroughly and horribly dead, and still had the smell of death in his clothes and the terror of death in his mind."

The two women's reactions were starkly different. One didn't like the painting. The narrator describes her as "still developing her sundial theory of art, which would count no hours but the sunny ones." But the other woman, who had come to terms with the reality of suffering and evil in her own life, pondered the painting for a while. The narrator provides a powerful description of the importance of Good Friday for our vision, our vocabulary and our lives: "She studied it soberly, with something like recognition or acknowledgment in her eyes, as if those who have been dead understand things that will never be understood by those who have only lived."