

UPF Fellowship “Understanding the Crucifixion Today”

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Thank you for the opportunity to share with you.

I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands where we are variously gathered. I pay my respects to their elders, past, present and emerging.

Our topic is “Understanding the Crucifixion Today”. We cannot “Understand the Crucifixion Today”, if we do not “Understand the Crucifixion of Yesterday”, specifically, what happened on Golgotha 2,000 years ago.

Sadly, populist Christian ministers often propound heresy, if not outright blasphemy, when preaching about the crucifixion of Jesus. What I refer to is captured in grisly detail in Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ”, where the impression is given that what saves us is *the suffering* which Jesus underwent, in obedience to the Father, where what really matters is *the love* with which he underwent that suffering.

The 11th century mediaeval scholastic theologian, St Anselm of Canterbury, proposed a theory of satisfaction to understand the crucifixion: that the infinite majesty of God was offended by human sin, and only the suffering of a God-man could ‘satisfy’ what was due to God. The theory may be sound in its time and in its highly-nuanced scholastic form—I am not competent to judge—but it certainly is not satisfactory in today’s world. It smacks of a sado-masochistic plot. That the Father is pleased with the Son’s suffering is simply abhorrent. It contradicts the basic Gospel affirmation: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.’ (Jn 3:16) The Father did not need the Son’s suffering to convince Him to love us and to grant us salvation. He was already on our side; for us, not against us (Rom 8:31). God did not need the crucifixion of Jesus! Besides, God’s love is eternal; God is faithful; and God does not change - so the crucifixion does not effect any change in God!

So what is the crucifixion of Jesus about? How can we understand Jesus’s sacrifice?

I suggest that the only way to make sense of it is to turn it around. Jesus's sacrifice is not intended to *change God* – as I said, God is already on our side, eternally!—rather, Jesus's sacrifice is intended to *change us*. Jesus's death is not a human sacrifice to God, but a God-sacrifice to us. That is how I understand St Paul's letter to the Romans: "If [God] did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?" (Rom 8:32) It is God showing us in the most dramatic form possible just how much God loves us—the infinite vulnerability of infinite love—even when we have done our bloody worst, when we have killed "the Author of life" (Acts 3:15), who in his dying gasp breathes forgiveness (Lk 23:34), entrusting himself to the Father (Lk 23:46). And the Father does not let him down, but raises him, and he appears offering *shalom*, peace (Jn 19:20, 21, 26), forgiveness (Jn 20:23), and reconciliation: "For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life." (Rom 5:10)

And how do we "Understand the Crucifixion Today"? In the very same way! The suffering of the poor, of the people of Ukraine, all other victims of war, conflict, and violence, the millions of refugees and asylum seekers, those who are physically, psychologically, sexually abused, the victims of domestic violence, all who suffer in today's world, the mass extinction of species, the damage to eco-systems - that they too are innocent, like Jesus, and what is being done to them is an offence to their God-given dignity.

Their suffering should convict us of our murderous complicity in creating a world where God's beloved daughters and sons suffer and die needlessly – and motivate us to work for peace and justice for all people and all creation; in other words, to work for the coming of God's kingdom on earth.

Thank you. And may God bless you in this Holy Week.