The Redemptive Death of Jesus

There's a lovely poem called *Born Again* by Lynn Ungar which includes the lines:

> Whatever the legend of re-birth, there is always time in the fire, under the ground, hanging on the cross or the tree. Don't skip over that part of the story. If you would be reborn, you have to die.

The poet's reference to 'hanging on the cross' indicates that she is thinking of the death of Jesus. It reminds me of the lovely passage in St Paul's Letter to the Philippians which tells us that Jesus 'emptied himself' of his equality with God by becoming human and then 'humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross'; and it was only after that shameful death that 'God raised him up.' (Phil. 2:6–8)

For thousands of years great Christian thinkers and saints, and millions of so-called 'ordinary' Christians, have asked themselves: 'Why was Jesus willing to die such a shocking death, why did God allow this to happen?' Over the centuries theologians have come up with a whole range of answers to that question – and many of these past answers don't seem very convincing to the people of our time. We have to acknowledge that we are dealing here with the mystery of God's loving plan. But our faith invites us to explore this mystery. We can pray that we will be given the gift of finding some insight into why Jesus was willing to die this torturous death. And this may throw some light on why, as the poet says, 'If you would be reborn, you have to die.'

We can begin by recalling the passage in St John's Gospel in which Caiaphas the high priest says to his colleagues that 'It is better for you that one man should
die for the people, rather than that the whole nation should perish.’ (Jn. 11:49). These words indicate that Jesus was being put to death as a scapegoat – a way of trying to escape responsibility for the murder by shifting the blame for the crime on to this innocent victim.

The Gospel tells us that Jesus refused to accept that he was the guilty one: ‘If I said something wrong, testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?’ (Jn. 18:23). But we can believe that he also willingly allowed himself to be scapegoated in order to be in solidarity with all the millions of innocent people and groups who have been scapegoated down through the ages. We think of the six million Jews who were murdered by the Nazis. Or of the hundreds of thousands of migrants who are now refused asylum in Western countries on the grounds that they will bring crime or will take the jobs of the local people. And we are at last waking up to the rape and abuse of huge numbers of trafficked women and girls who have been forced or tricked into sexual slavery; the men who are the ‘customers’ of these innocent victims disclaim responsibility by claiming that the trafficked people willingly chose to engage in prostitution.

By allowing himself to be tortured and murdered, Jesus put himself alongside not only those who have been scapegoated but also everybody who has to suffer and die. Not only that, but he also identified himself with the suffering of billions of animals and even of the Earth itself. As Pope Francis would say, he truly heard ‘the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor’ (Laudato Si’ 49).

Some people think that God seems not to care about the suffering of so many people. But the agony and death of Jesus, who is divine, was God’s way of showing us that the very opposite is true. God is with us especially when we suffer and die and Jesus came to live and die as one of us to show that this is true.

The unflinching love of Jesus that God was still with him, despite his agony and his sense of abandonment, has inspired millions of his followers down through the centuries. His example and inspiration was the source of the trust and spiritual energy which animated the life and death of well-known martyrs like Archbishop Romero in El Salvador and Sister Dorothy Stang in Brazil. And millions of far less famous Christians still find in the gospel accounts of the agony and death of Jesus the power to continue to trust in the love and care of God even in their own suffering and as they face death.

Every time we pray the Hail Mary we end it by asking the Mother of Jesus who stood by his cross, to pray that we too may be given the grace to face suffering and death. In my own case, I am now eighty-five years old so I am one of those who is considered to be particularly at risk from the coronavirus. I am aware that I may already be dead by the time this article is published. I pray that I, and the millions of others who are in a similar position, may be given the grace to follow the example of Jesus in facing suffering and death. And I am confident that those who read this article will keep us all in their prayers.

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