

Entering the Paschal Mystery

John Dear | Mar. 18, 2008 On the Road to Peace

Last week, after lectures at the Thomas Merton Conference in Vancouver, British Columbia, and in Victoria and Cowichan Bay on Vancouver Island, I caught the early morning ferry back to Tsawwassen and Vancouver. That trip is one of the most magical rides in the world. I left the Sydney port at dark and sailed the nearly two hours past the green forests of the Swartz Bay islands, beside seals, otters, dolphins and countless gulls. In the morning twilight I could see the distant, majestic, snow-covered Rockies. There, alone on the ship's top deck, amidst the healing peace of the natural world, I pondered the ancient invitation of Holy Week: to enter the Paschal Mystery of Jesus.

It was in 1994, while spending eight months in a North Carolina jail cell for our Plowshares disarmament action, that I gained new insight into this ancient mystery. Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister wrote with concern and compassion, and offered a comment, in passing, that I never forgot. In the end, she wrote, the only way to peace and justice, to lasting nonviolent social change, is through our sharing in the Paschal Mystery of Jesus.

The Paschal Mystery. Who speaks of the cross today as a way to change the world? And yet isn't that precisely the methodology of the Gospel, the road to salvation, global transformation and peace? Jesus confronts the empire, enacts truth and love, saves humanity from our slavery and addiction to violence, and teaches us how to live and die -- by way of the cross, that is, through active nonviolent resistance to institutionalized evil. He healed, fed, taught, befriended, touched, fasted, prayed and campaigned for peace, yet the empire continued to oppress and kill, so he took the long road of nonviolence into committed truth-telling, tough love, civil disobedience and gave his life to set off a nonviolent explosion that would disarm and transform the world. That explosive nonviolence in his Paschal Mystery continues every time we join his nonviolent struggle against empire and the culture of death, and welcome his truth and love, his reign of nonviolence.

So this week, we remember how Jesus entered Jerusalem using classic street theater to make a point: riding on a donkey, offering the image of a nonviolent, humble messiah, calling for a world without war. He deliberately fulfills Zechariah's vision of a nonviolent leader leading us to a new nonviolent world: "Lo, your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt. ? He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem, and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations. His dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth" (9:9-10). Instead of seeing his vision of peace fulfilled, Jesus realizes that we prefer war and death, so he breaks down and weeps as Jerusalem comes into view (Luke 19:41-44).

We remember his nonviolent civil disobedience in the Temple, where he turned over the tables of injustice in

dramatic symbolic action, denouncing institutionalized injustice and religious cooperation with empire, calling us to become people of contemplative prayer. His action fulfilled his lifelong nonviolent campaign, like Gandhi's march to the sea where he picked up the illegal salt and brought down the British empire; like Dr. King's march into Birmingham where he broke the law on Good Friday and brought down segregation; like the Burmese monks who march for an end to the military dictatorship, carrying their begging bowls upside down. Jesus does not yell or scream or hurt anyone, but he disrupts business as usual, abolishes the cultic system, announces the end of religious cooperation with empire and calls for contemplative prayer.

We remember his last supper, the heights of nonviolence he reached when he said, "This is my body, broken for you. This is my blood, shed for you." He does not say, as the U.S. president does, "Your bodies broken for me; your blood shed for me." Jesus gives his life for others, but does not take life from others. He demonstrates that as violence and war require killing and bloodshed, nonviolence and peace require giving our lives, pouring out our blood. Just as the Eucharist reconciles all in the nonviolent Jesus, war destroys our bodies, sheds our blood, divides us all and destroys the body of Christ. War is the anti-Eucharist.

We remember how he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemani that God's will, not his, be done; how his fidelity to the God of peace enabled to go through his suffering and death in a spirit of nonviolence and compassion. We remember his rebuke to Peter, who tried to use violence to defend himself against the Roman soldiers. "Put down the sword," Jesus still commands us. We remember how shocked the disciples were at his steadfast nonviolence, how they realized that he would not defend himself violently, how they all ran away, how Jesus was arrested, tried, and tortured by the empire, as empires still do today.

We remember the charges brought against him: "We found this man misleading our people. He opposes the payment of taxes to Caesar and maintains that he is the messiah, a king" (Luke 23:2). We remember his words to the Roman Procurator, "My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom did belong to this world, my attendants would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Judeans. But as it is, my kingdom is not here" (John 18:36). We remember how he was mocked by 600 soldiers, the whole Roman cohort (Matthew 27:27-31).

In the end, Jesus was capitally sentenced for capital crime and given capital punishment. As he was executed, a victim of the death penalty, he continued his active nonviolence, showing compassion even to the murderous soldiers of the empire: "Forgive them, they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34) We remember his last words, "It is finished," how he consciously chose to complete his mission of transforming, salvific nonviolence (John 19:28). We remember his "loud cry," (Mark 15:22-27), which gathered the cries of all the world's poor and oppressed peoples, dying from imperial wars and corporate greed.

Jesus was killed by the Roman empire for his nonviolent resistance to injustice, for confronting the religious authorities in their collaboration with the empire, for practicing civil disobedience. His execution by the empire was meticulously legal. Likewise, his resurrection, as Daniel Berrigan points out, was manifestly illegal. He breaks through the imperial seal, walks past the Roman guards, and greets his friends with blessings of peace. He does not get mad at them, seek revenge or retaliation, or show any trace of resentment. He does not order Peter to kill Pilate or his soldiers. Jesus remains thoroughly nonviolent, as well as thoroughly opposed to empire, war, injustice and idolatry. There, at the end of John's gospel, he finally calls Peter, and ourselves, to discipleship. "Follow me on the road to peace," he says.

This Holy Week, we mark the fifth anniversary of the horrific U.S. war and occupation on Iraq, the centerpiece of the Pentagon's strategy for military, imperial, global domination. The war goes on, the killing goes on, and the media support for empire goes on. Instead of siding with the nonviolent Jesus in his passion, in the suffering of the world's poor, most North American Christians, in their silent complicity, side with the Roman officials, the imperial soldiers, the betrayers and deniers and passersby. Few go the way of the nonviolent Jesus into steadfast resistance to the U.S. empire. Few side with him, his journey, and its anti-military, anti-imperial implications. If we did, not one Catholic, not one priest, not one bishop, not one cardinal would support our government's slaughter of Iraqis, its imperial ambitions, its weapons of mass destruction, its executions, its culture of violence. We would all non-cooperate with empire and be in trouble like the troublemaking Jesus.

This Passion Sunday, commenting on the death of Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho in Mosul (near the ancient biblical city of Ninevah), Pope Benedict XVI connected the dots between the passion of Jesus and the passion of Christ in the world today: "Enough with the slaughters [in Iraq]. Enough with the violence. Enough of the hatred in Iraq."

The spiritual life, the work of peace and justice, means entering the story of the Paschal Mystery, which plays out around us. We see the passion and death of Christ in the people of Iraq and Afghanistan, Darfur and Haiti, Colombia and Kenya, in Los Angeles and New York, Detroit and Camden, Albuquerque and Philadelphia. The poor are Christ suffering and dying because of the empire, because of the military, the torturers, the bombers, the bombmakers, the warmakers, the generals, the judges, and the corporate elite.

Likewise, we see the resurrection in every act of healing, every act of disarmament, every courageous public stand against the forces of death and empire. The Paschal Mystery plays out in every movement of nonviolence which seeks to transform injustice into justice, to overcome evil and hatred with goodness and love, to end the Iraq war, nuclear weapons, the death penalty, abortion, racism, sexism, global warming and corporate globalization. Christ is risen in those who say No to the forces of death, in those who walk the road of nonviolence, in those who keep their eyes on the God of peace come what may, in those who say Yes to a new world of nonviolence.

On that ferry to Vancouver, as we came around one of the green, wooded islands, the bright morning sun suddenly rose above the calm blue sea and the distant Rockies in a breathtaking vision of beauty. I took it as a sign of the new world of peace to come, a taste of resurrection, a glimpse of the fullness of life that is ours as we share the journey of peace and nonviolence with Jesus. My hope and prayer is that we can enter his Paschal Mystery and take a chance on resurrection, with all its glorious social, economic and political peacemaking implications.

John Dear's books on Jesus, "Transfiguration," "The Questions of Jesus," and "Jesus the Rebel," are available from

www.amazon.com [1]. The DVD, "The Narrow Path," about his teachings on Gospel nonviolence, is available from www.sandamianofoundation.org [2]. Next month, he will speak in Erie, PA; Sioux Falls, SD; Fond du Lac, WI.; San Jose, CA., and Indianapolis, IN. For info, see: www.johndear.org [3].

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