

Justice is done: Why doesn't it feel like it?

Joan Chittister | Jan. 4, 2007 From Where I Stand

As the world prepared to celebrate World Peace Day, Saddam Hussein walked to the gallows in Baghdad. "The Americans," commentators pronounced solemnly, "had handed him over to the Iraqis."

The phrase carried with it eerie echoes of another moment in time when another ruler also maneuvered to avoid responsibility for the death of another prisoner. And just as surely as Pilate is remembered for the death of Jesus, so will the United States be remembered for the death of Hussein, however intently we argue that the execution was "the work of the young democracy" in Iraq.

But that is only the beginning of the inanity of such hollow justice. The ironies and questions raised by such an event are legion. The very process of the hanging brings such hangings into question:

First, for his trip to the gibbet, Hussein wore a dark suit and hat, overcoat and leather shoes. No derelict this one. Instead, we have here a head of state, once supported in his ruthlessness by the very ones who "handed him over" to his death. Then, he was the U.S. bulwark against an ambitious and increasingly Islamicized Iran. Now, he is the hero of those who would defy the United States and its own self-righteous religious or chauvinistic tendencies. Just as he went to the gallows, Quran in hand, praising God, expecting glory, so did we go to war, Bible in hand, proclaiming the justice of God.

The situation is sobering. Had we managed, as a result of this kind of frontier justice, to turn a political tyrant into a new kind of idol? A champion for those who are intent on vanquishing what they see as a new generation of Crusaders? A martyr for the Palestinian cause and a model of resistance against those who are seen to be an unholy threat to the Muslim world? Are these two different Gods? Or is it possible that both of us have misread God a bit?

Second, the mask traditionally put over the faces of condemned prisoners to save their executioners a reminder of their humanity, he refused. This was a man whose defiance was proud to the end. Now he is celebrated across the world as a martyr to U.S. domination, in fact. So the question is, who won here? Anyone?

Third, his hangmen, on the other hand, all worked with covered faces to hide their identities. Clearly, they fear reprisal. They are not nearly as naive as we were when we rolled triumphantly into Baghdad. They are not so

callow as to expect to have flowers strewn at their feet for hanging him.

On the contrary, they know that this very act of hanging can only give new energy to the insurgency, to the killings, to other executions that only continue the history of executions symbolized by this one. So where is the peace here? What kind of justice is being served here?

Street dancers in Dearborn, Mich., celebrating the execution may have come much closer to the bone of it: "Now we have revenge," they said. Re-venge. New vengeance in the chain of unending vengeance. Once his, now theirs. And when and where will it ever end if someone does not end it?

Fourth, they tied a cloth around Hussein's neck before dropping the heavily knotted noose over his head. It's an interesting humanitarian gesture designed surely, to prove that a barbaric act by civilized people is more humane than the inhumanity of its violent counterparts. After all, saving the neck of a hanging victim from rope burns is not only hardly necessary, it is also ludicrous, laughable, absurd. What does it mean to be human? What is justice? How is peace served by violence?

Finally, Hussein was executed on the Muslim feast of Eid ul-Adha which celebrates the deliverance of Ishmael from the sacrifice of Abraham. On this Islamic feast it is customary to release prisoners -- not to execute them.

The event was, in other words, totally surreal. Except for one thing: the questions it raises, if we will only face them, are profoundly important ones for us as a nation and for a world in transition to a village.

But the ultimate irony, perhaps, lies in the fact that now political pundits are saying what philosophers, theologians, mystics and holy ones have been saying ever since Jesus said, "Peter, put away your sword." They are all clear: "No," they tell their interviewers across cyberspace, "No, this will not change anything in Iraq -- except, perhaps, make it worse."

Violence begets violence the saints have told us over and over again.

We have seen it with our own eyes. We invaded Iraq and started a war. We justified the invasion on false grounds and now carry on our own backs the onus of injustice: There were no weapons of mass destruction. The Iraqis did not lie to us. They had nothing to do with Al Qaeda. They had not been breeding terrorists. They did not support the attack on the Twin Towers.

All of those things have been forgotten. Now, instead, we tell ourselves that we did, at least, eliminate a dictator. But how? And at what cost? And with what gains as the numbers of our dead climb and theirs skyrocket?

Maybe we should listen again to the saints. Perhaps we should give our own role in World Peace Day new attention as we approach the day in which we will be given "a new strategy" for Iraq. If it were not for American voters, we would be nowhere near such a moment. But the vote may not have been enough to make the difference. We may all need to do more to make the point that World Peace Day is a pressing, immediate, demanding and real challenge, not a celebration of the kind of self-serving sanctimonious nationalism that says we believe in peace, therefore we are peaceful.

From where I stand, it seems to me that we need to look this execution in the eye, unmasked, and demand that our politicians do more about peace than more violence.

I have an idea that if we begin to do something about the violence we do as a nation in the name of justice, we will all begin to think differently about all kinds of life always.

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