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 Palm Sunday

### Evil Exposed

George Thompson writes: “Nearly ten years ago our family attended the Passion Play in the Bavarian village of Oberammergau. This drama has evolved over the centuries, beginning immediately after the catastrophic plague of 1633. The village had been devastated by the many deaths. But, throughout the tragedy, they had felt the abiding presence of the spirit of Christ who suffered with his people. The villagers collectively decided that, in gratitude to the graciousness of God in sparing their village, they would dramatize the story of Christ’s passion, inviting neighboring villagers to be their guests. Visitors now come each ten years from around the globe to witness this presentation.”

“One of the most memorable scenes at Oberammergau is the depiction of Palm Sunday. Hundreds of the town’s citizens participated in this scene daily for five months. Children were recessed from the village school just in time for the triumphant entry.”

“On the day we attended the performance, these German kindergarten children had gathered at an outdoor fountain near the sculptured form of a life-sized Jesus upon a donkey. These children danced barefoot in the water and reached over to touch the feet of the statue. In that beatific moment of summer flowers, playful children, and an Alpine paradise, I thought: “Can it get any better than this?”

“As I walked away from that unforgettable setting of grandeur, I suddenly felt the paradox of standing just a few kilometers from Berchtesgaden --- once the command center of Hitler’s evil empire.”

“If there is any hope for this world of bombing raids and human hostility; if there is to be peace in our time; if love shall ever preside over the homes of our congregation; if reconciliation between the races shall ever occur in this noble city; it will be because a man rode into Jerusalem one day, not to set himself upon a throne, but to enthrone his cross of sacrificial love in the hearts of each of us.”

Why did Jesus die? This question can be examined from three points. First is the Roman charge. In short, Jesus died from this perspective because Pilate put cynical power games before justice (normal behavior) and naked self-interest before both. The Jewish Charge concerned two primary issues. First, was Jesus Temple action, a direct threat to the very center of Jewish life, Temple and Torah. He changed, or was accused of changing, the central focus of Jewish life. Many saw him as a ‘false prophet, leading Israel astray.’ Secondly, was the aforementioned Temple action. Third, because he saw himself as in some sense Messiah and potential, at least, revolutionary instigator. Fourth, was the fear of calling down Rome on the temple as a political nuisance and finally he pleaded guilty to these charges at a crucial moment in his hearing. Lastly, what did Jesus have to do with his own death? It all is wrapped up in God’s understanding of servant hood. But there is an even deeper issue in this day’s events.

What did God decide to do about evil? First we must look at what “evil” itself might be. We need not look at the crucifixion for long to begin to struggle with a profound truth about the nature of evil.

Evil is real and powerful. It is not “us” versus “them.” The Old Testament is all about what God is doing about evil. God has undertaken a plan: it is a daring and risky plan, involving God in so much ambiguity that he begins to look like a double agent, becoming compromised at many points in order to pull off the solution, this plan involves drawing evil to a point in order to deal with it there.

It is the cross with which we must grapple if we are to both analyze and find a solution to the problem of evil. It is not enough to say “How could a good and powerful God allow evil into

the world in the first place?" Some, many, see the Christian faith as having the role of rescuing people from the evil world. Insuring them forgiveness in the present and heaven hereafter. We must take 'evil' by the throat and not look for easy answers. For easy answers will not satisfy a world that has lived with World War I, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, human slavery, or September 11<sup>th</sup>. Jesus, God, takes it on in the only way it can be handled.

We have a place to go that is reliable and gets to the heart of the issue, the Gospels. We cannot read the Gospels looking only for some background to our own atonement theology. But we must read them in a holistic way in which they tell how the evil in the world --- political, social, personal, moral, emotional --- reached its height, and how God's long-term plan for Israel (and for himself!) finally came to its climax. The story is about how Jesus announced God's kingdom and went to his violent death.

The political powers of the world had reached their full and arrogant height in Rome and the most important confrontation in the gospel accounts, that to which all the stories point, is between Pilate and Jesus. Human systems from Pilate to Caiaphas to Herod overreach themselves and are part of the deep structure of the problem and end up putting Jesus on the cross.

There is corruption within Israel itself as the people who bear the solution become part of the problem. The Pharisees, the priests in the temple, the revolutionaries all attempt to fight violence with violence which can only result in a victory for violence, not a victory over it. The death of Jesus when it comes is not just about pagan nations but of Israel itself which once chose a king so it could become 'like all nations' and now is reduced to saying it has no king but Caesar.

\*\*\*The Gospels also tell the story of the deeper , darker forces in the language of the demonic all of whom know of God's presence on this earth. The Gospels introduce us to "the Satan" which is doing its best to bring Jesus down into the trap to which Israel has already fallen. Jesus speaks of "the power of darkness" which indicates that on that night in particular evil was being given a free reign to do its dirtiest through soldiers, a betrayer, confused disciples and a corrupt court. The mocking bystanders on Calvary are echoes of the taunting and tempting voice that had 'tempted' in the desert. The power of death seems to be winning and the Gospel story for a moment says that in this Jewish prophet hanging on the cross is the point where evil had become its totally ugly self.

The Gospels tell the story of how the line between good and evil runs right down the middle of Jesus' followers themselves. Look at Peter, denounced as "Satan", Thomas the 'doubter', James and John, concerned with their place in the kingdom, and Judas, poor Judas. When that Garden gets its darkest the candor with which the failings of the church's first leaders are described is remarkable.

The story the Gospels tell is about the downward spiral of evil. The very remedy offered has itself the germ of evil within it, so that attempts to put things right brings on a second order evil. The casual injustice of Caiaphas the high priest and Pilate the governor and the mocking of the crowds seems to say clearly, evil has won.

How does Jesus deal with all this? Buck up, for the Gospels are also the story of how God's long-term plan from Abraham through to the time of Jesus, the apparently ambiguous and risky plan finally comes to its completion. Jesus earthly ministry takes on all the evil of the world and shows the world how God intended that Israel should have lived. He touches the worst of the world's problems, leprosy, a woman with an issue of blood, the corpse of the widow's son and Jesus is not unclean but whole in all cases. He sits and celebrates the kingdom with all the wrong people. He rescues all the evil and unredeemable people. He tells stories of a lost coin and two lost brothers to indicate this is God's policy, His intention. Finally he goes out to die with the rebels, sharing their shame though himself innocent. The taint of evil lies heavy on him throughout, and somehow he bears it, takes it all the way, and exhausts its power.

\*\*\*Jesus articulates and models the call to Israel to be Israel. Israel is to be at last the light of the world, the city set on a hill. Israel is to show the world what it means to be God's

people. His final act is taking on the role of Servant, the ultimate representative of Israel, bearing the sin and shame of Israel and so of the world. Jesus has been obedient to the Israel-vocation which he had himself announced in the bracing and so often misunderstood Sermon on the Mount. He had turned the other cheek. He had picked up the Roman Cross and gone the second mile. He was set on the hill unable to be hidden. He was acting as Israel, the light of the world, on behalf of the Israel that had embraced the pagan darkness.

Jesus had warned his people of God's impending judgment for their failure to follow his call to be the light of the world, he had identified totally with Israel taking its vocation on himself and now he was taking on himself the direct consequences of the failure and sin of Israel. He was dying, literally, for their sins. This, the Gospels tell us, is what it was about all along. Jesus was taking upon himself the direct result of the ways in which God's people had failed in their vocation.

Jesus is the king who promised to come back but Oh, what a different kind of king he would be. He came to rule, to judge, to heal and to save just as God had said. Jesus had made his own dark theme with deep biblical roots. Jesus took that "time of testing" of which the prophets had spoken, all upon himself so that everyone else could be spared.

Evil is the force of anti-creation, anti-life, the force which opposes and seeks to deface and destroy God's good world of space, time and matter, and above all God's image-bearing human creatures. Death is the final enemy and God, through His Son Jesus declares in this week of week's that leads to the Day of Resurrection, that death itself has no more power. God always has the final word. Do you believe that!

Jesus spends his brief life walking against the on-rushing crowd, heading against the wide road to destruction, and walking the narrow path of life. For him, the narrow gate, the narrow path to life, is the way of nonviolence. He refuses to kill, to support killing, to pay for killing, to be silent in the face of killing, and to be comfortable in a world of killing. Filled with life, Jesus teaches and practices nonviolence. He possesses not a trace of destruction or violence. How does the culture of death and destruction respond to such luminous, subversive nonviolence? It labels him 'possessed' and does what it only knows how to do: It kills him. But Jesus is raised to life by the God of nonviolence. His choice is affirmed and he insists that we take the narrow path to life as well." [John Dear]

Dare we stand in front of the cross and admit that it was all done for us? Dare we take all the meanings of the word God and allow them to be recentered upon, redefined by, this man, this moment, this death? Dare we address the consequences of What Jesus himself said, that the rulers of the world behave in one way, but that we must not do it like that? Dare we embrace Jesus way and not the worlds? Only in this way can we address in our own time the problem of evil which still haunts the world God loved so much, the world for which the Messiah gave his life. Amen.