

## **Be Bold, Confront Injustice: A Holy Week Meditation, Pastor Alan Lai**

As we are closer to Holy Week, I invite you to conduct your reflection on the death and resurrection of Jesus beyond personal dimensions, but to begin to see the social and political dimensions of the meaning of the cross. Over the centuries, the church has been educating an inadequate view of the meaning of Jesus' death at the expense of Judaism. Based on the surface value of the gospel's texts, the church has been blaming Jews for killing Jesus and has advanced an individualistic view of the meaning of Easter. Because of these reasons, Mel Gibson's controversial film, *The Passion of Christ*, despite having the ability to inspire personal devotion, remains a dangerous film in my view.

Let me start by saying the coming of Jesus was to make God's rule visible. Jesus' message of the kingdom of God was completely contradictory to what the Roman Empire believed and practiced. When Jesus showed us this kingdom life by defending the poor, exercising healing, showing hospitality, and preaching good news, Jesus' shattered the very foundations from which Roman Empire was built. Against the well-educated view, Jesus' plan was not to die but to bring hope, although he ended up dying. The empires of this world could not live with Jesus' vision of love and non-violence. Jesus' peace message was so threatening and radical that the assembled array of evil forces killed him.

We need to remember the normalcy in the first century was peace through victory; that is, peace was achieved through waging and winning wars. Ideas such as dining with the outcasts, welcoming enemies, sharing possessions, looking after the poor were all ridiculous concepts to the ancient Roman's world. To put away these "outrageous" ideas once and for all, Pontius Pilate thought putting Jesus to death would end the story. However, God approved Jesus' peaceful practices and shunned the Romans' practice of violence. In resurrection, God declares victory over all the forces of evil and proclaims we are no longer imprisoned by these evil forces. We are no longer imprisoned by the drive to kill, to oppress, and to exclude. Those who continue to build a society based on violence and inhospitality are in the wrong side of history. The resurrection of Jesus is to convey a message that nonviolence prevails, that Jesus' message of radical love overcame Caesar's message of war. This loving God invites us to live a radical new way based on forgiveness and servanthood. Through Jesus, God invites us to be bold when it comes to confronting injustice and the forces that bind us.

I reject without reservation the teaching that says through dying on the cross, Jesus paid God a ransom or he died on our behalf. This teaching, coined "substitutionary atonement" or "redemptive violence," despite being traditional and long-held, significantly takes away Rome's responsibility of killing an innocent and peace-loving man, and their part in promoting cruelty – something that God strongly opposed. By suggesting God plans to have Jesus kill on the cross as a way of salvation, the church paints God as a cruel divine child abuser who intentionally uses violence to bring wholeness to God's creation. We have to seriously think through this problematic contradiction because it challenges the moral goodness of God. If unchecked, it fosters a perverted view that says accepting injustice, unnecessary abuse and violence as being "closer" to Jesus or God. Throughout history, many God-loving women endured abusive husbands and the minority accepted unjust social systems because some thought it a "Christian" thing to do. It is time to

depart from this erroneous view because first, Christianity has no interest in prompting perversion, and second, the church has no business in providing a theological rationale for it.

God has no need for Jesus' blood to satisfy God's anger. While we learn in general that God is displeased when human beings sin; what really concerned God's heart as shown in the gospels in the first century was that poor people have no one to care for; hungry children had no food to eat; innocent people suffered and being slaughtered with no one spoke for them. All these things happened because ancient Rome built an empire that was based on privilege, violence, and indifference. The slaying of innocent blood is never holy or redemptive. What Paul was doing in his famous letters such as Romans and Galatians were to transgress the public understanding of the cross as a way of punishment into an instrument of hope. Paul has a unique way of confronting Roman normalcy. He did it through using their symbol of death and turning it into a symbol of life. To talk about the cross in a positive fashion was Paul's political act that meant to turn the ancient Roman world upside down – what imperial Rome thought was normal was abnormal in God's kingdom; what imperial Rome's thought abnormal was God's normalcy. Paul was in no way arguing crucifying Jesus on the cross was a "positive" event. Rather than a divine requirement to have Jesus die, the death and resurrection of Jesus radically shows us the difference between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world. It also shows us love and forgiveness will triumph over violence and inhospitality. Death is not the final word. Empowered by the theology of the cross, Lutherans have learned to recognize the crucified and the risen Christ through the faces of the oppressed. The cross allows Lutherans to stand in solidarity with human pain and be bold to confront injustices in the world.

My last comment is about the phrase we sing so much: "Jesus takes away the sin of the world." We do not live in a sin-free world; not before Jesus was born, and not after Jesus' resurrection. We continue to be bombarded by sinful human nature and sinful political and social structures. But the good news is despite living amidst such forces, God's grace to us prevails. The resurrection of Jesus was God's way to say "Yes" to Jesus' practice of hospitality and says "No" to violence. While we continue to be sinners and cannot free ourselves from the bondage of sin, God declares us saints as we identify ourselves with Jesus through the promise of baptism. What Jesus takes away is our involuntary participation in evil. In Christ, we have been invited to live in the kingdom of God. The reason for hope is that in the face of hatred, a table of banquet is set. The cost of discipleship is that it may cost our lives if we choose to live this radical way. But the message of Easter is: Be bold and be not afraid, peace of God is with you always.