

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

PASSION SUNDAY

SUNDAY 5 APRIL 2009

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Mark 14, 15

"The Passion Story"

1. Mark's story of the Passion of Jesus, the last days of his life, in Chapters 14 and 15, reads like a tense human drama. Ched Myers describes it well: "It is an intensely political drama, filled with conspiratorial back-room deals and covert action, judicial manipulation and prisoner exchanges, torture and summary execution." (Binding the Strong Man, 354) Most disturbing, however, is the complicity of the community of Jesus in conspiracy, betrayal, denial, and finally, total desertion. At every stage, even during the intimacy of the sacred meal, profound intimacy is enmeshed in profound betrayal.

We meet the human Jesus in the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane overwhelmed with weariness, experiencing anguish and inner distress, and suffering. He was deeply disappointed and overwhelmed when his closest friends could not stay awake and be alert to support him in this difficult time. Yet, he was not disempowered, nor did he lose his vision, passion and resolve to live out the good, the just and the true.

These final days were in the preparation from the beginning of his ministry, beginning in his first synagogue confrontation (1:21ff). The Pharisees and Herodians conspired as to how to destroy him in Chapter 3 when he gave primacy to the alleviation of human suffering over against religious observances, like the Sabbath. The Passion story was the outcome of his life and practice, not a passive fidelity to an earth-transcending, all-determining divine plan. He was never passive.

2. But, this is not just an event frozen in the Passion of Jesus. William Loader writes that, "regimes do this to people in the name of all kinds of claims to common good and, not least, to the furtherance of peace. People do this to people, when anger conspires to suppress love and goodness. We all do it. ... It has no reference to models of atonement." (First Thoughts, Passion Sunday) The reality is, people do this to people!

Briony Tallis, the central character in Ian McEwan's book, *Atonement*, is a thirteen-year-old girl who sets into motion conspiracy, betrayal, denial and desertion, unwittingly destroying her own life and the lives of those whom she loves most. The first part of the novel portrays the world of an upper-middle-class family living in the country in England in the 1930's. She becomes resentful when she observes that her young adult sister Cecilia is forming a relationship with the young adult Robbie Turner. We learn that Briony has "loved" Robbie for a few years. He has just returned from Cambridge University, but he is actually from the working class, the son of the family's gardener. A series of unfortunate events, a love letter gone astray, and a sexual attack one night on her young cousin, Lola, prompt her own "savage and thoughtless curiosity" (113). Briony's imagination, driven by envy, constructs a discourse about a dangerous other, Robbie the maniac. Her cousin Lola conspires in this creation of a new identity: "on our first afternoon I thought he was a monster" (119). How easily we form the identity of the other, based on our desires, envies, fears and anxieties. Later the two girls construct a story that Robbie was the predator. Lola actually knew the identity of the predator. Briony's family support her clear and confident claim to the police that she saw Robbie, a socio-economic class judgement, and he is sent to jail for a crime he never committed. The novel

continues to process this complex and contradictory beginning and Briony's search for atonement.

This story is the human story of the pursuit of love and goodness, yet a pursuit that so easily is misrecognised, subverted and betrayed. As Terry Eagleton poignantly notes about Briony's misrecognition of Robbie and Cecilia's encounter: "What Briony reads as a brutal assault on her sister by her lover is in fact one of the most adroitly tender, breathtakingly exact cameos of love-making in modern fiction". ("A beautiful and elusive tale". *The Lancet* 358.9299 (Dec 22, 2001): p2177) There are many parts of this book that draw tears from the heart, so be prepared. It is about the complex journey in guilt to atonement.

3. We all know about times of the subverting of love and goodness in our lives, small and great, in our families, in the lives of our friends, in the church, and in society. To process all this we need safe places and appropriate ways to deal with them.

This story also asks us, how are we to be faithful to Jesus' Passion for justice, goodness, love and truth in our world, to which we are called?

The only person to offer Jesus true compassion in the Passion narrative, the only person who really understood what was happening, is the unnamed woman who anointed his head with oil. Ched Myers suggests that this is another "discipleship paradigm" (358). While Jesus' disciples just don't get it, only this woman and a few other women do.

It happens in the house of Simon the leper. Jesus began his ministry by healing a leper in Mark 1:14ff. Lepers were considered unclean, and even after they were healed, their social stigma persisted. Again, Jesus challenges such social divisions created by the religious discourse of the time, and upheld by leaders. Social divisions are discourses that define people in such a way that isolates them. These discourses diminish the expression of love and community. They betray inclusion in the social body of God. By associating with such people, Jesus is seen to betray the dominant religious values and meaning.

The woman, however, is not afraid to associate neither with Simon the leper nor with Jesus. Even more, she is the only one who understands what Jesus is doing and anoints him both for his prophetic role and for his death. As Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza writes: "Since the prophet in the OT anointed the head of the Jewish King, the anointing of Jesus' head must be understood immediately as the prophetic recognition of Jesus... It was a politically dangerous story" (found in Ched Myers, 359).

My colleague Ken Luscombe profoundly interprets this woman's act of anointing as a *full confession* and understanding about Jesus. Peter's, on the other hand, he suggests, is a *half confession* as to who Jesus is, in Mark 8:27ff. Peter only sees the Messiah aspect, the divine aspect, and not the human aspect, the suffering love of Jesus. This unnamed woman expresses a full confession: in her act of offering compassion and solidarity to Jesus at this crucial time; and in the act of anointing in which she confesses Jesus as the One sent of God and the one who chooses the way to suffer on behalf of his life, acts and teaching. That is, expressing justice, goodness and love for all, particularly marginalised and suffering humanity.

4. This woman provides a paradigm for being faithful to the Passion of Jesus. Not just confession as religious acts and assent of the hearts and minds. It is a confession in acts, orthopraxis, that express love, justice, goodness, and truth.

To conclude I want to share the story of Archbishop Oscar Romero as a contemporary example of solidarity with Jesus' Passion.

Oscar A. Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, was assassinated in El Salvador on March 24, 1980, while celebrating Mass in a small chapel in a cancer hospital where he lived.

James Brockman, the biographer of Archbishop Oscar Romero, reveals his spiritual development: his faith and practice only developed by learning about himself, through psychoanalysis and living, and by listening to and interacting with the poor. (*Spirituality Today*, Winter 1990, Vol.42 No. 4, pp. 303-322)

He was born in 1917, in a small, remote town in the mountains of El Salvador.

Romero had the courage to examine his life. In 1966 he realised he was a perfectionist and an obsessive-compulsive personality type. At the age of 54 he had a further three months of psychoanalysis in which he learnt more: That "subconsciously he had been transferring many feelings from his home life to his present relationships, and that explained his timidity and shyness with others, his brusqueness and coldness".

According to the *US Catholic*: "Romero was a surprise in history. The poor never expected him to take their side and the elites of church and state felt betrayed.... He was predictable, an orthodox, pious bookworm ... [he] criticize[d] the progressive liberation theology clergy so aligned with the impoverished farmers seeking land reform."

However, he was dramatically transformed when his priest Rutilio Grande was ambushed and killed along with two parishioners within three weeks of his election. Grande died because he defended the peasant's rights to organise farm cooperatives.

The night Romero drove out to view Grande's body and the old man and seven year old who were killed with him, marked his change. The eyes of the peasants asked: Will you stand with us as Rutilio did? Romero's "yes" was in deeds. The ascetic and timid Romero was changed that night. He was honest about himself, his failings, owning his fear of death, and wanted to identify with Jesus in his love for the poor.

Romero begged for international intervention. He was alone. The people were alone. In 1980, the war claimed the lives of 3,000 per month, with cadavers clogging the streams, and tortured bodies thrown in garbage dumps and the streets of the capitol weekly. With one exception, all the Salvadoran bishops turned their backs on him, going so far as to send a secret document to Rome reporting him, accusing him of being "politicised" and of seeking popularity.

Oscar Romero gave his last homily on March 24. Moments before a sharpshooter felled him, reflecting on scripture, he said, "One must not love oneself so much, as to avoid getting involved in the risk of life that history demands of us, and those that fend off danger will lose their lives."

(Source: <http://www.uscatholic.org/culture/social-justice/2009/02/oscar-romero-bishop-poor>)

Archbishop Oscar Romero was faithful to the Passion of Jesus in his love of Jesus and his brave stand for the poor and against the government and military. He was shot giving mass the day after he preached a sermon on the radio calling on Salvadoran soldiers to obey God's higher order and to stop carrying out the government's repression and violations of basic human rights.

May we learn to express the Passion of Jesus in our own lives and community.