

Good Friday C

Why is this night different from all other nights? This ancient question, spoken by the youngest person at a Passover Seder, brings to light the purpose of the gathering, the reason for being together. As we move through the bittersweet culmination of our religious year, it is one we would do well to ask today, perhaps more than any other question on any other day. Why is this day different from all other days?

In the story we just heard, Jesus was killed, along with two criminals. But that is not different, people are punished all the time, and have been since the dawn of humanity. Slowly, slowly we have begun to accept that capital punishment is not much of a deterrent to anything. For what they think are good reasons, some folks are eager to die. Under Roman rule, people were crucified regularly. Their guilt lay in whatever the authorities deemed guilt-worthy; not in any timeless, universal realm of wrongdoing, but in whatever suited the powerful to punish.

In our time and place, many people are punished as criminals – many of whom would dispute the appropriateness or equity of their punishment. And many of us would agree with them. To call mass incarceration a myth is a false and insidiously manipulative construct designed by the powerful to

delay and obfuscate the realities of our inequitable culture.

So why is today different? In the letter to the Hebrews, and in many other places, Jesus is described as one who is without sin. Whatever crime he is being punished for, it cannot be a universal one, it must be subjective, criminal only in the biased view of somebody in power, a crime that would not be a crime if somebody else were in power – like the crime of being Jewish in Hitler’s Germany, or inconvenient in Stalin’s Russia, or artistic in Mao’s China, or, as still happens in much of America, DWB: driving while black.

No, suffering is not unusual; not then, not now. We ask ourselves if we are in one of the most godly nations in the world – “One Nation, Under God,” or one of the least. On the one hand, we pride ourselves on competition, and individual achievement, even though that means we must continually separate ourselves from each other. But God tells us to come together in love; we can hardly do both. On the other hand, our separation and competition gives us the daily, even hourly choice of attitude about each other, we of all nations are a people who must continually choose how we treat our neighbors. What is godlier than continual choice? We want the American experiment to continue, despite all of its difficulties and frustrations and injustices. For we live in hope that we are capable and

destined to become a godlier people – two steps forward, one back.

For Christians, today is the day when our ability to choose between separation and compassion is suspended. Today is the day when we are shown how it is done. The action and the word become one, and it suits us to listen, see, and feel God's truth. Today God chooses to become fully one of us, even to the point of death. God doesn't have to do this. Today is when the power and the example of choice forces its way into our consciousness unless we actively ignore it. For the rest of the day, or the rest of our lives we shall have a better ability to look at our own sufferings, whether they be outrageous fortunes or slightly annoying next-door neighbors, painful diseases or depressing, self-destructive habits. We will be more able to move in an atmosphere and attitude of mutual and self-love, without the fear of dying unfulfilled. We needn't choose whether to die for a cause. Instead we can live for a purpose. The answer to the question, "Why is this day different from all others?" is that today Jesus has done that once for all, has chosen to die for the cause of obviating the power of death. From now on, we can both live and die according to the purpose he professed: by learning to love one another even as we would be ourselves loved.