

Good Friday

Friday, April 14, 2017

The most recent project for director Martin Scorsese is a movie based on the novel *Silence* by Shusako Endo. *Silence* tells the story of Catholic missionaries to Japan in the 17th century. Particularly, it follows the efforts of a zealous and pious priest, Rodrigues, to Christianize Japan. However, the history of these efforts is well documented and quite violent. The Kakure Krishitan, the Hidden Christians, are persecuted by the Japanese. Initially, the Japanese officials sought to get the priests to renounce their belief by torturing them and having them step on a fumie, a picture of Jesus, as a sign of their apostasy.

Eventually, they settle on the idea of turning the priests by torturing fellow Christians and forcing the priests to watch. Throughout the narrative, Rodrigues struggles with the silence of God amidst his mission work. Try as he might, pray as he does, seek to hear what God might say, there is nothing. In one of the poignant scenes of the novel, Rodrigues finally hears the voice of God in, of all things, a fumie. As his friends and fellow Christians are persecuted, he is exhorted to step on the picture of Jesus. He fights this command with every fiber of his being, until the image suddenly speaks to him. It says, "You may trample. You may trample. I more than anyone know of the pain in your foot. You may trample. It was to be trampled on by men that I was born into this world. It was to share men's pain that I carried my cross."

Thus, we find ourselves in Holy Week at the point of Jesus' solidarity with humanity, as he carries his cross. We are at Good Friday. The irony of the name of this day should not be lost on us. Of course, we look in retrospect at the promise of salvation that comes from Jesus' full participation in suffering and abandonment, but the events of this day are those

that have continued and continue within the human story. The violence that cut Jesus down is not something that we relish. Rather, the horror of the crucifixion leaves us all in silence when we reflect on the complete surrender by Jesus.

The week began with his entrance into Jerusalem as the Passover feast approached. According to the gospel accounts, crowds line the way, branches and cloaks were spread before him. And, of particular note, they cry out, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” Thus, the wheels of Jesus’ end are set in motion. No one enters the Roman controlled city of Jerusalem during a very politicized festival that celebrates freedom and the end of oppression as a “king” and has much likelihood of leaving unscathed.

Indeed, the events that follow express the brutal power of the state. The people who lauded Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem sought a king, and the Jewish expectation of Messiah is deeply connected to a vision of Israel’s return to earthly power and worldly peace. Thus, the experience of Jesus is deeply baffling to those who held out such hope for this type of a Messiah. Jesus’ engagement with the power structure of that day is not to meet force with force. Rather, Jesus’ engagement is to yield, to relent, to suffer, to die. Throughout, however, the power of love is actively engaged with the destructive forces. If nothing else, the crucifixion of Jesus is a sign of the inhumanity that humanity metes out against itself. Has done this and continues do so.

While we know the end is not the end within the Christian tradition, it is important to sit with this very unsettling scene of an innocent man hanging from a tree. It is a reminder that such barbaric force exists, and we cannot deny it. Moreso, we must wrestle with our own

culpability in the violence that continues in our world today. (The Good Friday hymn, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord,” is not just a pious query, but it can be heard as an accusation.)

Ultimately, the import of the events of this week are captured in the title of a famous book by Jurgen Moltmann: *The Crucified God*. What we observe in the cross is our propensity to destroy that which is a threat, perceived or otherwise. What Jesus’ willingness to undergo such brutality and violence to the point of death expresses is the participation by God with all the godforsaken in history. Might does not make right. God enters into the place of suffering that we fear, thus there is no place that God is not. This interpretation does not excuse the continued heinous activity by tyrants. Indeed, it is an exhortation to end such barbarity. The suffering of God does, however, offer a lens through which to see the suffering of the innocents everywhere. They do not suffer alone. God suffers with them.

Indeed, God invites us to let go of our efforts to control life and to develop structures of what is faithful and what is not. With Rodrigues in *Silence*, we are shown that it is not our strength that wins the day, it is not our moral uprightness that can gain us immortality, and it is not our success that is a sign of divine pleasure. Rather, in the paradox of the cross, we are shown a different way. One suffers so that we might be freed not to perpetuate suffering. One bears the pain of the world, that we would stop inflicting it upon ourselves and others. One shatters the systems of oppression that we might participate more actively in the arc of history that is bending toward justice. One dies that we will never die alone, but we rest in the mercy of the one who silently braved injustice to speak to us of incalculable love.