

Jesus' Life and Death as Consequence and Sacrifice

The editor of *The Christian Century* magazine recently acknowledged that he finds himself “moving away from the . . . idea that Jesus had to die a sacrificial lamb to satisfy an offended and angry deity.” One reader wrote in to complain that the editor was throwing out the mystery of the sacrifice that Jesus made in his crucifixion. I think this reader missed the point.

The view of Jesus' crucifixion as an act of appeasement toward an angry God is utterly appalling, in my view. If that idea ever had currency with me, I moved away from it long ago. Such a view makes God out to be a monster and, if you regard Jesus as God's son, the Supreme child abuser.

I do believe there is something very profound in the view that Jesus' life and death constituted a sacrifice, however. One could say the same thing about the life and death of Gandhi, or Martin Luther King, Jr., and many others.

In the sacrifices of other people, especially those undeserving and those whose lives have been in some way profoundly exemplary, we are sometimes able to discern dimensions of love and forgiveness that call us to account and convict us of our failings as individuals and as a species. Simultaneously our hearts and minds may be opened to others, releasing us from the bondage of narrow tribalisms, prideful ambitions, and self-centered indulgences.

Jesus gave himself, and ultimately his life, in the service of aims and purposes that we recognize as divine, or God-centered. That hardly means God wanted it so, much less demanded it so. Jesus did not die for my sins, or for anybody else's. He died because of the sins of those who failed and rejected him, those who opposed and resented him, and those who conformed themselves to the social, political, and economic imperatives of imperial rule by Rome in first-century Palestine. He and his teaching called into question the powers that be, threatened the status quo, and overturned the tables of the money-grubbers, the hypocrites, and the sycophants of repressive law and order by decree.

In “The Present Crisis,” poet James Russell Lowell wrote, “Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne.” If Jesus had to die on account of our sins, it is not because God demanded it, but precisely because that is the sort of world we so often fashion for ourselves.

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