

Why?

Mark 15:1-37
March 23, 1997, Palm Sunday

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Why?

When I was in high school, I read one of Thornton Wilder's novels entitled, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. I have forgotten many of the details of the book -- I read it over twenty-five years ago -- but I remember the strong impression it made on me.

The book begins with a single incident. A bridge in Peru collapses, and the five people on it at the time fall to their deaths. The novel carefully examines the lives of each of the five, asking the question, *why?* Why these five people? Who were they? What was happening in their lives? What were they thinking, what were they feeling, what were they doing? Why did each one happen to be on this particular bridge at this particular time?

Why?

Why is it that an eight-month old infant has to spend the first months of its life struggling against an invasive cancer? Why is it that an elderly man simply dropping by his neighborhood bank is taken hostage by an armed robber, dragged out into the parking lot, and shot and killed? Why is it that one hundred and fifty-eight innocent people in a federal building in Oklahoma -- conducting their business, doing their jobs - - are made victims of someone's dubious political gesture.

Why is it that an opportunity for democracy in the former Yugoslavia results instead in bloody civil war and the reckless release of pent up ethnic hatred? Why is the state of Northern Ireland torn apart by religious bigotry -- not year after year -- but century after century? Why do our own communities continue to be divided along racial lines, black and white watching each other from a distance, full of suspicion and fear? Why is it so hard for us to erase the stains of our country's past, the bitterness and the guilt?

Why do the rich get richer and the poor get poorer? Why do some of us have more than enough to eat every day and others have little or nothing at all?

Why does might -- and not right -- so often get its way? Why do the users and the corner-cutters, the manipulators and the cheaters seem so often to win? Why do life-affirming churches -- churches that seek to build people up, to bring people good, to restore people to wholeness -- struggle, while the "death culture" -- the drug trade, the gambling establishments, all those institutions that seek to make profit by tearing people down and taking away what they already have -- thrive?

Why do I get angry and say things I don't really mean, when inside I want to say I'm sorry? Why do so many couples give up so easily? Why do so many children have to live in households torn apart by divorce or neglect or abuse?

Why do people hurt themselves? Why do so many people prefer to hold on to the status quo, even to remain in patterns of self-destruction, rather than take the risk to change? Why are so many people deep down so unhappy?

Why does God seem content to let the world spin out of control?

Why? There is no answer ...

Yes, we may offer various theories and explanations to account for many of these concerns. We may examine the impact of psychological factors or sociological forces. We may discern historical trends or political motives. We may discuss the issues from a theological point of view.

But all these "explanations" remain partial answers and half truths, just pieces of the puzzle. They have to do with *how?* and *what?*, with causes and effects. But they provide no real answer to the question *why?*

There is no answer that will satisfy the deep hurt, no answer that will satisfy the deep longing.

There is no answer ... just the stubborn reality of the way things are. Suffering is ... Injustice is ... Sin is ... Death is ...

We must deal with the world as it comes. We must live -- if we will live! -- we must live and act and respond to the world as it is, without being able to know why it is as it is. The *why* questions remain ...

Why?

Why did Jesus die?

Why did the adoring crowds turn so quickly against him? Why did ordinary people -- why do ordinary people -- so readily allow themselves to be manipulated by people of power and prestige?

Why was Jesus hated? Why do people despise what is good and just? Why are people so threatened by what is beautiful and genuine?

Why didn't Jesus defend himself? Why wouldn't he answer his accusers? Why didn't Jesus come down off the cross and prove to all humanity the power of God over evil? Why didn't he make it clear who he was?

Why did God stand by as Jesus was put to death? Why didn't God save Jesus? Why did God ask Jesus to die?

My God, my God, why did you abandon me?

Why? There is no answer ...

There is no answer to the *why?* ... no answer that will satisfy our bewilderment ... no answer that will mollify the horror of the cross.

There is no answer ... just the stubborn reality of Jesus' death. Even though we cannot answer the question *why?*, the fact of Jesus' death remains. Each of the gospels takes great care to tell this story . Clearly the reality of Jesus' death itself was at the heart of the faith of the early Christians.

We too must deal with this fact as it comes. We must live and act in response to this death. How does it change us? What difference does it make for us and for our world?

Can it be that these two sets of questions belong together?

Can one question be answered by another question?

Can Jesus' suffering and death take its meaning precisely from its connection to our suffering and our death? God answers our *why?* by coming to us, by sharing all of our human experience with us in Jesus. The suffering and defeat, the hurt and injustice we experience, Jesus experiences, too. God is where we are!

God is there! God is with us! God goes with us ... all the way!

We hang a cross on the wall at the front of our church ... But a cross is nothing but an instrument of execution. It is the same as if we hung an electric chair or a poison gas canister or a hangman's noose at the front of our church! Why would we want an emblem of death adorning our walls?

It is because the cross is no defeat, but a great victory! The cross is a great victory over the power of evil ... a great victory over the power of death. The cross is a victory for us ... a victory for Jesus ... a victory for God!

It is not an emblem of death that we hang on our walls, but an emblem of life -- the symbol of the reality of God's power, a symbol of the reality of God's love.