

FACING JERUSALEM I

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Friday, the thirteenth — an unlucky day, everyone says. It's interesting to see why. First of all, Friday is considered an ill-starred day ever since that Good Friday we remember this week during Holy Week. Good Friday — God's Friday — the day Christ was crucified. A bad day. In jolly Old England it used to be the day for hangings. Could there be some connection with the felons hanging alongside Jesus? Some possible contact? Outreach of hope? As when suicides were buried under crossroads? Denied consecrated ground, at least they might have the sign of the cross?

Anyway, Friday has been considered a bad day. Even when we celebrate as in TGIF affairs, thank God it's Friday, it is because Friday is over.

Then there is 13. Thirteen has a long history of bad associations. But again Holy Week offers a reason for its being bad. At that last supper of Jesus and His disciples, remember there were 12 disciples. You know who was number 13, odd man out, the one betrayed and crucified, and so 13 is unlucky. One doesn't get a group of 13 together for a dinner party, even a simple supper. Friday the 13th is doubly bad.

This Sunday I chose the scripture to describe the scene and a text that anticipates the scene and whole drama of Holy Week. In Luke 9:51 we read "when the time was come that He should be received up, He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem". And He went, knowing what was in store for Him: the shouts of hosanna on Palm Sunday to be followed later by cries of "Crucify Him!"; the prayer to be spared the bitter cup of suffering followed by the agony of the cross. But then the triumph of Easter, the victory over evil and death! What a drama of redemption! And what a basis for a homily on how we, following His example, must face the Jerusalems of our lives, the defeats, the sorrows, the failures, and with the power of the spirit bring about that which is good — that we, like Him, should face our Jerusalems, and triumph.

But something about this text started me thinking about someone else. I was reminded of another, four centuries earlier in another culture, who steadfastly set his face to go not before the Sanhedrin or Herod, but an Athenian court, who was accused and convicted of un-Athenian activities, corrupting others and teaching strange gods, who, ignoring opportunities to flee, ultimately drank the bitter cup of hemlock poison, who died, who did not rise from the dead, but who became immortal through the gospel that Plato, his disciple, wrote. Somehow one thinks of Socrates. How do we understand this wise old man of Athens, this Socrates, his life and martyr's death in comparison with Jesus?

There are some interesting parallels. First, Socrates felt a vocation, a divine calling to the life he led. There was no baptism, no descending dove, though he spoke often of a kind of inner voice and would go into a kind of mystic trance on occasion. There was not the personal relation Jesus felt to a heavenly father. But a calling there was. Socrates explains it in a humorous way in his

famous Apology, his speech of defense before the Athenian jury. A friend, he said, once asked the oracle at Delphi, “Who is the wisest man in all Greece?” The answer came, “Socrates.” The friend reported this to Socrates who expressed great surprise. But, he said, “gods don’t lie” — really a crack at the popular Homeric religion where, for example, one of the epithets of Athena can be translated “skilled in deceit”. So to obey the god he felt compelled to go about inquiring of others who pretend to know only to discover they did not know what they claimed. Somewhat like the way Jesus showed that the Pharisees, the conventionally righteous, were not as good as they claimed. And, as Socrates said, people resented his showing them for what they were. And Jesus found the same. He was not hanged for telling people to love one another.

After such inquiry Socrates concluded that perhaps he was the wisest, because he is the only one who knows he doesn’t know anything, while others think they know, but they don’t. So the god is vindicated. A funny story, we say. This explains Socrates’ habit of questioning people and refuting their claims to knowledge. But in the content of his speech and in keeping with Greek rhetorical style, Socrates moves from humor to a deadly seriousness; in effect saying God has commanded me to make men examine their thoughts, and nothing, no threats from the court, can deter or dissuade me from this divine obligation. I shall continue to question as before. I shall never stop. Here I stand. Here he clearly sets his face to go to his Jerusalem, to defy the Athenians who would silence him, and no matter what, to follow his calling even unto death.

But what of his teaching? we might ask. Surely the gadfly of Athens who claimed to know nothing had no message to compare with that of Jesus! What did he teach? The focus of his famous apology seems to be this: that the unexamined life is not worth living. And what does this mean? Not, I think, that one should spend one’s time arguing about ideas, and make a career of attacking and refuting others. One is mistaken, I think, if he imagines Socrates buttonholing people just to argue and refute their ideas. What he was doing is reflecting an ancient Greek concern expressed in the very ancient injunction, Know thyself, “Gnothe seauton”. He was concerned not so much with the validity of one’s idea, but the state of one’s soul. His message was not as many suggest — learn to argue, refute, question everything — but really examine your inner being and see if there be any wicked way within you.

That is why in this same speech he expressed his conviction that no evil can befall a good man either in this world or the next, and why he consistently taught that it is better to suffer evil and injustice than to perpetrate it, that one should turn the other cheek. And this is why his most earnest expressions of his values and concerns culminate in a vivid picture of a judgment of the souls of men — as in the Republic and the Phaedo where he talks about his own death and immortality.

These visions of judgment do not have the same spirit as New Testament eschatology. They have a Pythagorean quality and reflect the oriental concept of reincarnation. But the urgency is the same — repent, for judgment, if not the kingdom, is at hand — the wicked will suffer damnation and only the pure and good in heart may see the divine beauty and truth and goodness. Surely this is not unlike the teachings of Jesus.

And what about his method to bring out his message? Here is where the famous Socratic method comes in. Socrates called it the skill of the mid-wife. By questioning he helped others give birth to their ideas and then to examine them. Big ideas — like justice, the right, truth, goodness, beauty, courage — in an attempt to get clearer and clearer their higher meanings in relation to us.

So the long discussion of justice in the Republic does not focus on themes like rights and duties — rather it culminates in a doctrine of the nature of the healthy, good, and just soul. And the analysis ends with a vision of judgment — what happens to the just and unjust soul.

(Admittedly, many would rather ignore these visions. They're too unphilosophical, mystical, religious. Just as most histories of philosophy praise Thales, the first Greek philosopher, for saying everything comes from water. Another fragment — that all things are full of gods is de-emphasized or ignored. Perhaps religion and philosophy are not to be so sharply distinguished, after all.)

A further clue to Socrates' method can be found in an even earlier thinker in an even older culture, in Confucius. Confucius was concerned to teach the possibilities of a good society on the basis of people living by moral example. He, too, had a similar commitment to his message in spite of opposition, and he, too, faced his Jerusalem. When asked, "Where does one begin this task?", his answer was "with the rectification of names" — which seems to mean the clarification and enhancement of moral principles. By way of explanation he said, "Let the ruler be a ruler; let the father be a father" — that is, live up to the ideal implicit in the term. Moral confusion rests on the intellectual confusion, but with the rectification of names comes the rectification of the self.

It seems that Socrates and Plato, with their theory of ideal forms that serve as the standards for our moral aspirations, involve the same kind of rectification of names. It shows some parallel with the injunction of Jesus: "Be ye therefore perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect." The ideal, not the average, is the standard. As for rectifying names, Jesus tended to clarify by parable. To the question, "Who is my neighbor?" he responded with the story of the good Samaritan. The whole focus, though, is similar. Goodness is a matter of inner rightness in tune with the ideal patterns, the will of God — not external conformity. "It has been said of old, thou shalt not kill; but I say unto you, whosoever nourishes hate in his heart is already guilty." The good soul is not a whited sepulchre, fair without but foul rotting bones within. Only the pure in heart may see God.

And when we turn to the positive content of the purified spirit, the answer for Jesus is clearly love — love to God and love to one's fellow man. And the judgment of the soul rests on whether or not one has it. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," says Jesus. "Feed the hungry, clothe the naked. Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these ye have done it unto me."

The Confucian ideal, called jen, is translated as human-heartedness, humaneness, great souled — but Confucius says simply it means to love one another; Confucius taught a principle that our

early missionaries called, somewhat grudgingly, the silver rule: “Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you.”

As for Socrates, we must never forget that great speech in praise of love in the Symposium. It describes what Augustine called a ladder of love leading the soul of man to God. Ever since, Platonists have had no trouble identifying the highest outreach of love toward the ideal of absolute truth, beauty, and goodness with the love of God.

We find, then, parallels in message and method, in concern and commitment. But surely there is a difference between the drama of Holy Week and the martyr’s death of Socrates, or the struggles of a Confucius. And indeed there is. Plato immortalizes Socrates, but there is no saving religion built around his person. We venerate Socrates for his commitment to follow truth wherever it might lead, even to death. He faced his Jerusalem with a calm and confidence in the ultimate goodness of things.

But the best that the spirit of Socrates produces is a kind of faith in some overall good rational order, and the ethics of patient Stoic endurance. And Confucianism seemed to require the aesthetic natural mysticism of Taoism to provide a confidence in the faithful order of nature as a basis for its hope for the good life.

But when Jesus steadfastly faced that week in Jerusalem, a transformation occurred. For the Christian, for the sober historian for that matter, something happened after that first Holy Week long ago to change the cross from a symbol of defeat to one of victory.

And ever since, for the Christian in the spirit of Jesus, when called upon to face the Jerusalems of life — suffering, failure, loss, disappointment — there is a new note of hope, an assurance that the best we aspire to is not destroyed by the worst we fear, that the redemptive power of God is at hand and is able, that love does conquer after all.