



# SAINT LUKE'S

“AN EVERYDAY OCCURRENCE”

GOOD FRIDAY

ISAIAH 52:13-53:12

PSALM 22

HEBREWS 4:14-16; 5:7-9

JOHN 18:1-19:42

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY

MARCH 30, 2018

A Holy Week conversation years ago began with a friend asking: “What kind of a god sends his son to die?” Substitutionary atonement has been the central theology of the Cross in the West for centuries: Christ died in our place for our sins. The at-one-ment – of humanity with God required a transactional exchange. More recently a fuller understanding of the Cross is being revealed, which I believe is part of Jesus’ promise that the Holy Spirit would guide us into all truth.<sup>1</sup>

If you are one of the Roman soldiers John describes, dividing Jesus’ clothing, what might you notice? Crucifixion is an everyday event in your life as a Roman soldier. Jerusalem isn’t your first posting. Jerusalem is a plum, earned after long years stationed in remote outposts. You have been stationed elsewhere in the Roman Empire, among many different peoples. To you as a Roman, the Hebrews’ religion seems feverish. There are so many layers of rules issuing from their all-powerful God. Just the one God. The Hebrews are adamant about it. Most peoples you have encountered have many gods. In Rome there are many gods. This is comforting because no one god has absolute power. There is always another god you can speak to. And you can always add to the collection, especially of your household gods. You would be mystified by the Hebrews: Why put all your trust in one god?

You have heard that the Nazarene teaches a new thing about his own religion. His God sides with the outsiders. You have heard that the Nazarene even raised a man from the grave in Bethany. (If only, you

<sup>1</sup> John 16:13

think). If the Nazarene is a god, why would he die like this?

When the Roman and the Hebrew authorities collude to condemn Jesus, it seems to you out of proportion. To you the Nazarene doesn't seem any worse than the others, and certainly no worse than Barabbas. The Nazarene seems to be picking up the tab for all the insurrectionists and street corner prophets and healers. It reminds you of that ritual the Hebrews perform when they take a goat and pray their sins onto the creature and drive it into the desert to die.<sup>2</sup> (As if a goat can remove the sins of a nation, you think). But this ritual comforts them. They have to do this every year. Their god is insatiable. As he stumbles along with the cross beam on his back, the Nazarene meets your gaze. He seems to refuse shame. He wants you not to look away. He seems to invite you beyond guilt, beyond shame.

We have more in common with other creatures than we sometimes like to admit. The psychologist Murray Bowen discovered that mice will always isolate and persecute one of their group. If you then take the victimized mouse and put it in with another group, that same mouse will join in isolating and victimizing a mouse in the new group. Victimized creatures become victimizers without exception. And on and on. The same with chickens. The persecuted ones in a flock have a dirty and bedraggled appearance. They have open wounds and bare patches where their feathers have been pecked away. Eventually, the victimized creature will die. In animal systems, the most vulnerable are targeted,

<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 16

systematically. It is not intentional. It is just how animal systems self-organize.

Bowen discovered that this is in fact how families, communities and nations instinctively self-organize. The philosopher Rene Girard says human beings by nature desire what others have. Mimetic desire, he calls it. (What is it that Jesus has that the various authorities desire?...a question worth pondering.) That mimetic desire gradually becomes violent and raises the level of anxiety and competition in the family, group, community or nation to boiling point. (There has to be someone to go to war with). Ancient societies instinctively organized around ritual sacrifice to bind their collective anxiety. Substitutionary atonement - Christ dying in our place - can be viewed as ritual sacrifice religion. It is surely an incomplete theology of the Cross.

Girard believes human societies still require victims to bind their anxiety. Instead of many little rivalries, all the attention, anger and anxiety are projected onto one person or group, who become "the problem". The target of the group's anxiety can be the most vulnerable and/or the most responsible person - the leader - in the system. There is always pressure to conform to the group. To step outside the group-think and stay there in the face of isolation and persecution takes great self-differentiation. (Peter and Pilate, both leaders, both cave to pressure from their respective groups), Dr. Bowen estimated that on a differentiation scale of 1-100, most of us are 40 or less. When someone is a 75 and steps outside the group-think, the group will usually kill

them off, or banish them. Once the scapegoat is selected and the victim is eliminated, the group's anxiety is calmed, and the group feels purified. Until the next time.

Girard becomes a Christian when he sees God in Christ standing with the victims, including those victimized by the prevailing religious system: women, slaves, Samaritans, foreigners, the sick and mentally ill. Christ himself then becomes the target, the scapegoat who dissolves the whole sacrificial cycle by willingly dying as victim and then rising. We are slow to comprehend its full meaning, but Christ's dying was once for all.

*The cross of Christ restores all victims of the scapegoat mechanism.<sup>3</sup> Instead of being guilty, victims are innocent; instead of being innocent, the persecutors are guilty. Unlike myths, the gospels portray scapegoating truthfully as the mechanism of collective self-deception that it really is.<sup>4</sup> Girard sees Christ forgive and break the cycle of violent desire by mercy, loving service and self-offering. *Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.* We are offered a way forward to end cycles of retaliation; the possibility of returning good for evil and the kingdom of God for the kingdom of death.*

AMEN

<sup>3</sup> Rene Girard: I see Satan Fall Like Lightning

<sup>4</sup> Rene Girard: Violence Renounced





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