

Explore the Bible: Crucified

May 1, 2017

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for May 21 focuses on Matthew 27:41-52.*

Unless we were the one hanging on the cross, it would be difficult for us to speculate as to which of the conflicts Jesus faced was the most challenging. Was it the betrayal of those he had trusted most, his disciples? Was it watching his mother suffer her own son's death? Was it the mocking of those he'd come to save or of those who had opposed him the most? Or was it something else?

Again, we can only speculate. Perhaps our best guide in making this discovery would be to observe Jesus' response to those different conflicts. He said not one word to those who mocked him. He didn't engage them in a blame game or a theological debate.

Mob mentality

By this time, Jesus certainly had plenty of experience with mob mentality. He knew the threat of nearly being killed when the religious elite incited a riot (Luke 4).

Scott Peck engaged in extensive research about how individuals will act in normally good ways but then turn on a dime and act out in a completely different, even evil way, when they become part of a mob bent on destruction. He wrote about it in *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil*. Many have observed this in their own churches. Otherwise genuinely good people can be stoked up to participate in such things as the unkind, even mean-spirited, expulsion of a pastor if the mob is allowed to rule.

Jesus knew this mob-mentality well and refused to dignify it with an

argument. His way of response was to not engage a battle he knew he could not win without abandoning his mission. He could not both destroy and save those people, even those meaning to kill him.

Staying the course in spite of God's silence

The only significant response Jesus gave to any conflict was to his own heavenly Father, quoting Psalm 22:1, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (v. 46). Certainly, Jesus' greatest dilemma on the cross was the sense that his own Father would not come to his aid in his greatest moment of need.

Nonetheless, Jesus did not allow even the silence of heaven to thwart his commitment to save humanity. There is no greater courage than the courage demanded to stay the course of love even when no one else, not even God, will affirm you for doing so.

In C.S. Lewis', *The Screwtape Letters*, the demon Screwtape is expressing this concern when he writes to his nephew, Wormwood: "You must have often wondered why (God) does not make more use of his power to be sensibly present to human souls. ... Sooner or later (God) withdraws, if not in fact, at least from their conscious experience, all ... supports and incentives. He leaves the (Christian) to stand up on its own legs—to carry out from the will alone duties which have lost all relish. It is during such trough periods, much more than during peak periods, that (the Christian) is growing into the sort of (person) he wants it to be. Hence, the prayers offered in the state of dryness are those which please (God) best. (God) wants (the believer) to learn to walk and must therefore take away his hand; and if only the will to walk is really there he is pleased even with their stumbles. Do not be deceived. ... (Satan's) cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do (God's) will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still

obeys.”

Without doubt, we live in a day of great moral confusion. Even among Christians and churches, there is great, heartbreaking ideological division that only seems to worsen with each passing year. Maybe that is because we have been too concerned about winning the theological argument of the day and not committed

The way of love

By his own life and death, Jesus demonstrated our only hope for finding a way through the desert of moral depravity. It is the way of love.

Jesus never said others would know we were his followers because we were able to win this argument or that. Rather, Jesus said, “By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

The Apostle Paul reported his own discovery of this truth. He said “prophecies ... tongues... knowledge” will all “come to an end” (1 Corinthians 13:8). Those who place their hope in doctrinal purity or their understanding of truth or their ability to demonstrate spiritual prowess alone will find that they have built their lives on sand.

Paul went on to say, “Now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13). At its core, being a Christian is not about believing correctly but living boldly for Christ no matter what the cost.

We can learn a great deal about God through the study of Scripture and attending multiple Bible conferences. In time, we only truly discover God when, even if heaven is silent, we stay the course of love as modeled by Jesus even if it costs us, as it did Jesus, our very lives.

Glen Schmucker is a hospice chaplain in Fort Worth.