

Reflection 2 - Faith Challenged, but Affirmed John 19:25b-42

It is, of course, a huge, mind-blowing story, utterly unbelievable. It just doesn't fit in with anybody's pre-conceived world-view. Crucified on Friday, dead and buried the same day, then alive on Sunday with a life that death cannot touch. You have to be kidding us - how can we have faith in such amazing events? And how can we believe that he did this for me, for you, for all of us? Not surprisingly, many theories have been established attempting to disprove and undermine these events. As early as the end of the first century, Docetists, a term from the Greek "dokein" meaning to "seem", denied that Jesus was truly a man. They asserted he only seemed to be a man. Thus it only seemed that he died. Mohammed, influenced by this teaching, wrote in the Quran, "They did not kill him, neither did they crucify him; it only seemed to be so."

More recently Hugh Sconfield in his book "The Passover Plot", purports that Jesus never really died, but he swooned, fainted and then was revived in his tomb by the cool air. Others denied the resurrection saying that Jesus stayed dead and what was seen afterwards was merely a spirit, a phantom, a vision or a mere hallucination. Our faith in the death and resurrection of our Lord has been constantly challenged and, no doubt, will continue to be so. How can we then assert that we have a gospel to proclaim and a faith to believe?

Standing near the cross, we are told, were four women and the disciple, whom Jesus loved. That this disciple was John, the son of Zebedee and brother to James, is most likely. That this same John wrote this gospel is disputed. Yet, as these amazing events unfold, you have a strong impression we are reading an eye witness' account. That truly wonderful act of love that, in the agony of the cross, in excruciating pain, Jesus thinks not of himself and of his own suffering, but of his mother, Mary. "Woman here is your Son" and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." Tom Wright suggests that in this act "he turns the Water of human life into the rich wine of God's love." Such an intimate conversation in such a public place of horror and shame. Surely an eye witness' account.

Certainly the author of the gospel is on a mission to show that this death of this Nazarene reflects numerous passages of Jewish scripture clearly evidencing that he is the Messiah. "In order to fulfil the scripture he said," I am thirsty." A direct reference to Psalm 69 verse 21 "...and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink." We can recall Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well when he talked of living Water. Where is that living Water now? Or we may recall the rich wine Jesus gave to the guests at the wedding of Cana. Now Jesus is given cheap wine - the wine which soldiers on duty drank. Now Jesus comes to the place where everyone else is, the place of thirst, of shame and death.

Crucifixion is a most cruel death, which can last for days. The eventual cause of death is suffocation. Strength in the legs is required as the sufferer gasps for breath. As the Jews forbade bodies to be left on the cross during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs of the three crucified men broken, thus bringing about death more quickly. When the soldiers came to Jesus however he was already dead, so they did not break his legs. Clear evidence that he most certainly did die and just to make sure one of the soldiers pierced his side. Scripture was again fulfilled. "None of his bones shall be broken" refers to Psalm 34 verse 20, "He keeps all their bones; not one of them will be broken." And again in Exodus 12 verse 46 referring to the Passover Lamb "...you shall not break any of its bones." John is here making a clear statement that Jesus is the true Passover Lamb. At that same moment that lambs are being killed in the Temple for the Passover Feast the next day, Jesus is also being killed. "They will look on him whom they pierced" refers to

Zechariah 12 verse 10 "...when they look on the one whom they have pierced." These are not coincidences. Our faith is truly affirmed. John writes, "He who saw this has testified so that you may also believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth."

The story of Christ's Passion begins in a garden and ends in a garden, perhaps evocative of the garden of Eden. At great risk to themselves two rich men asked Pilate for the body of Jesus so he could be buried in dignity. Joseph of Arimathea, was a member of the Sanhedrin, a group of Jewish leaders who called for the death of Jesus and Nicodemus was a Pharisee, who had questioned Jesus at night about his kingdom. Both closet followers of Jesus, they gave a late but costly commitment. Joseph offered his newly built tomb as a burial place while Nicodemus gave a huge amount of spices, much more than necessary, either symbolising great honour or inadequate faith in the resurrection. Unbeknown to them this fulfilled yet another prophecy written in Isaiah 53 verse 9 hundreds of years previously confirming yet again that Jesus was the Messiah. "He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth."

These are not coincidences. Unbelievable, yet true. An eye witness account. Our faith, though often challenged, is affirmed. Jesus' death on the cross should be real and personal for each one of us. So we can look forward to the joy and the hope of the resurrection.

Bill Pattinson
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