

Brief Reflection on the reading of St. Matthew's passion
Palm Sunday, March 16, 2008, at Custer Lutheran Fellowship by Pr. David Van Kley

A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words

Mel Gibson aside, in this text, violence abounds. In the garden, Judas leads a mob, armed with clubs and swords. Jesus says, "Have you come with weapons because you think I'm a **bandit**?" But our translation doesn't do justice to the Greek word "bandit," which means something like our word **terrorist**: an angry person with political motives given to indiscriminate violence toward the innocent. Jesus wonders if they think he's an Al Qaeda operative, about to blow up a marketplace or a Colombian guerilla holding half a country hostage. One of the disciples plays the part, drawing a sword and blood. But Jesus says, "No, put it away: those who live by the sword die by the sword." The world would do well to honor those words.

But the world doesn't. Jesus himself is the victim of first century terrorism. He is beaten, spat upon, slapped, and tortured. The actions of the soldiers of the governor are worthy of Saddam Hussein's guards or those at Guantanamo. They put a scarlet robe on Jesus, smash a gooseberry bush full of thorns onto his head, kneel in mock homage. After nailing his hands and feet to the crossbeams, they roll dice before his eyes, to see who could keep his clothes. This is not a G rated scene. This is not a G rated world.

The words themselves are abusive. Over and over, from every quarter, they are thrown at him, like poison darts. "Hey, Savior! Save yourself, why don't you? Son of God? You look it! Let's see you come down from the cross, miracle worker! What's the matter: can't you do it?" And I'm sure they said a lot of things too crude for gospel writers to record.

Ironically, Jesus himself says very little. Almost nothing. The one who spent his ministry preaching and teaching is mute. The one who **is** the Word speaks no words.

All the frustration and hatred and anger of every person on earth was gathered in that moment and dumped on Jesus. All the pent up feelings resulting from so many disappointments, feelings that really had nothing to do with anything Jesus had done, feelings of soldiers and priests, bakers and housewives, politicians and shepherds, their feelings and **our** feelings, their **sins** and our sins, funneled like black, scummy oil and dumped on one man until he drowns in it. Jesus is a like a sponge soaking up all that hatred until it's gone.

People say that "a picture is worth a thousand words." Only one man saw it clearly at the time: a soldier, a Roman soldier. "Truly," he said, "this man was the Son of God." His words are the **caption** beneath the **picture** of Jesus' passion.

I doubt that he ever forgot that scene, as long as he lived. I wonder if he was ever the same. I wonder if he had a taste for violence anymore. I wonder if he believed news of the resurrection and became part of the movement called "the Way." I wonder if he,

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too, suffered for the sake of love. I wonder if we will see him in heaven.

And you, my friend, what is it to you that this one hung there like a sponge, soaking up sin and death? What is it to you?