

15.04.2022
By Janet Foggie

Introduction

I am interested in the idea in John's gospel of the conflict of laws and customs. This is an idea which has motivated scholars from Augustine, through Thomas Aquinas, to the jurisprudence thinkers of the 18th century, down to the present day. As soon as human beings draw boundaries and make laws, they create tensions and contradictions between legal systems and between peoples. In this reading a custom is cited for the release of a prisoner at Passover and the people cry out the name of Barabbas, who was a bandit. We don't have any context for the desire to release Barabbas, whether it was simply in order not to release Jesus (a very christo-centric reading of the text) or whether Barabbas had a following of his own, a group who sought his release over anyone else's. At the end of this passage, the Jewish leaders are challenged that, under Roman law, Pilate could not find a reason to have Jesus crucified, but the leaders say they have their own law, and according to that law Jesus ought to die for claiming divinity. Despite the citation of custom and law, something wrong was being allowed to happen. We know that none of this talk prevented Christ's crucifixion, yet it still seems important that the talking happened. As you read the passage today, think of injustices you have witnessed, suffered, or heard of. What was the prequel? What happened before the injustice came to pass?

Text

John 18:1–19:42

After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, "I find no case against him. But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" They shouted in reply, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a bandit.

Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. They kept coming up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and striking him on the face. Pilate went out again and said to them, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him." So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!" When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him."

The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God."

Comment

The arguments over a case to be heard which precede the crucifixion might lead us to consider the fallible nature of law. It is possible for a law to be wrong, to be misapplied, or to have unintended consequences. The gospel writer looks on as a helpless observer: there is no role for an advocate in Jesus' case, and he himself speaks very little. In martyrdom, the acceptance of injustice without argument might be seen as a virtue. Do we view it so today?

In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, there was no religious freedom in the British Isles. In Scotland, the Presbyterian church had the backing of the Scottish parliament and to be a catholic was illegal: many beliefs we would consider mainstream today would be counted as heresy. In England, the Anglican church, backed by the English parliament at Westminster, allowed non-conformists to worship but they were excluded from attendance at certain schools, and were not allowed to attend Oxford or Cambridge Universities. In accordance with these restrictions, a young scholar, Isaac Watts, enrolled at the Dissenting Academy at Stoke Newington in 1690. He was to specialise in logic and went on to write the leading textbook on logic. Despite being unable to study there himself, Watts' textbook became the standard text at Oxford and Cambridge and remained on the Oxford syllabus for over 100 years.

The customs and rules of his day limited Watts' educational opportunities, and yet those who sought to restrict intellectual freedom in this way used his work. I wonder if they had any awareness of the contradiction between their actions and their beliefs. Watts was also the author of one of the greatest hymns written for Good Friday. His verses, 'When I survey the wondrous cross' are themselves steeped in logic. He takes the viewer of the crucifixion through the emotional, devotional responses one might expect at each stage. It is perhaps this simplicity and pared down realism of his verses that have led to his hymn enduring so long.

When I survey the wond'rous Cross
On which the Prince of Glory dy'd,
My richest Gain I count but Loss,
And pour Contempt on all my Pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the Death of Christ my God:
All the vain Things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his Blood.

Watts places himself before the humility of Christ, the Messiah who accepted suffering meekly, and responds with a voluntary desire to counter or balance the successes of his life with the call to Christian meekness. Is this our response to the crucifixion? Should it be? Are we charmed by vain things? Are we proud? Such personal vanity has become the currency of our times: the social media platform, the celebrity, the reputational currency of our generation. Do Watts' ethical standards make us want to argue that we should keep the vain things? That pride can also be a virtue?

See from his Head, his Hands, his Feet,
Sorrow and Love flow mingled down!
Did e'er such Love and Sorrow meet?
Or Thorns compose so rich a Crown?

His dying Crimson, like a Robe,
Spreads o'er his Body on the Tree;
Then I am dead to all the Globe,
And all the Globe is dead to me.

This fourth verse was omitted from the hymn book of my childhood. Was it in yours? Do we understand and embrace death in the way that Watts did? Am I dead to all the earth? Is all the earth dead to me? Watts alludes to a spiritual reality beyond the physical realm in which death is shared and inescapable. It may also be that this was a way of people understanding what we would call today the 'mask of trauma' that is, the response of those who have seen truly traumatic things or had traumatic experiences which renders it difficult for them to have the facial responses to emotion which we expect of each other. We speak figuratively of negative experiences by saying 'I died inside' or 'I died of embarrassment' as if the erasure of self is a normal part of humiliation, however mild. For those whose traumatic experience is much greater than the normal experience, that inner death might lead to other negative behaviours, some of them self-preserving, and some inadvertent, which protect that person from the possibility of a second traumatic experience by numbing all emotional responses.

Were the whole Realm of Nature mine,
That were a Present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my Soul, my Life, my All.

Finally, the non-conformist response is one of gratitude. This was very common in Scottish Presbyterianism too, even in the weakly understood Calvinism in which I was raised. If salvation was by grace alone, then the correct response to the actions of God as relayed to us in scripture was gratitude. It was from gratitude that all our good deeds emanated: our love for our neighbour, our desire to improve the lives of others, our compassion for a broken world. All these things flowed out of gratitude for a redemption freely given to us by the sacrificial death of Jesus. Most modern theologians care not for the language of blood and sacrifice so clearly articulated by Isaac Watts, Calvin, and many others, and perhaps with good reason. For me, the loss of gratitude as a motivator, especially in the face of oppression, is a real loss. If we re-evaluate pride and we re-evaluate vain things, so that both are acceptable, and we learn to love ourselves as we are, then the need for gratitude dissipates from the theological vocabulary. It seems anachronistic, unacceptable perhaps, to suggest that our response to the miscarriage of justice and the mistreatment of Jesus should not be to put ourselves on the barricades, but rather to humble ourselves and to seek out feelings of gratitude for our salvation. Has it become a benign and toothless emotion, gratitude, when once it was a fundamental gut-response to the actions of the divine in history?

Whether or not the modern theologian agrees with Isaac Watts in his logic, in his theology, in this personal hymn of response, many of us will sing it tonight. I wonder if we shall sing it a little differently knowing the rights to education denied its author, and the customs which excluded him from the career he might have had? Do our theological views of the crucifixion of Christ still exclude others? Do we think that exclusion is justified?

Response

Sing together, or on your own, Isaac Watts' hymn. Think about what you know of his life and writing and consider for yourself your response to his words. What's the relationship between emotion and logic? Is your own response to this hymn more

logical or more emotional?

Prayer

God of logic and law,
we come before you bound by our customs,
looking this good Friday for affirmation, not challenge,
for self-acceptance, not rejection,
for self-esteem, even pride, not humility,
yet we see none of these in the crucified Christ,
a victim of the miscarriage of justice,
betrayed by his friend, sentenced unfairly, killed cruelly.

If we owned the whole of the natural world,
that would not be enough to give back to you in recompense,
Giver of Life,
as all we seek seems so small compared to the death that Jesus suffered.

As we stand together at the foot of the cross,
and survey the events that took place there,
in silence, we shall bring our innermost prayers to you.

Amen