



A worshipper carries a cross during the Good Friday procession in Pirapora do Bom Jesus, Brazil, on April 7, 2023. (OSV News/Reuters/Carla Carniel)



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It is Good Friday, the most solemn day of the year. Pity the preachers who, year in and year out, must participate in the recitation of the passion account, which invites silence more than anything, and then they must preach on it. Columnists have a little more leeway.

Two years ago, I wrote [this](#) about the triduum:

When I was a young man, and I was first wrestling with such questions about our Catholic faith, a wise pastor put in my hands Hans Kung's magnificent book [On Being a Christian](#). For many years, I reread his account of the events of these three days as my Holy Week meditation. I regrettably lent the book to someone who never returned it but the gist was this: Jesus had it coming. He had challenged the religious authorities and observances of his day, healing on the Sabbath, disturbing the temple, forgiving sins. These deeds and teachings, in turn, challenged the political stability of the realm.

A little while later, a package arrived at my door and a kind reader sent me a new copy of Kung's book. I was and am terribly grateful to have this volume again this week, not least for that important insight Kung rendered: Jesus had challenged the authorities of the law and the temple, and on Good Friday, they took up his challenge and defeated it. Because his challenge was inextricably tied up with his person, to defeat the challenge, they needed to defeat him too. And they did.

"The political trial and execution of Jesus as a political offender by the Roman authorities, therefore, was not by any means a misunderstanding or a pointless happening, the result merely of a trick or a blatantly trumped-up charge," Kung writes.

The failure of Jesus' ministry is total. The temple was not destroyed, still less rebuilt. The reign of peace and mercy that Jesus had announced ends in shame and ignominy, in pain and sorrow.

"The one crucified between the two crucified criminals is visibly the condemned embodiment of illegality, unrighteousness, ungodliness: 'counted among the wicked, 'made sin,' sin personified," Kung writes.

"The death of the heretic and blasphemer, the false prophet and politically suspect seducer of the people might perhaps have been one to be endured in a stoically heroic attitude," Kung continues. I quote the rest of the paragraph at some length, not knowing what could be edited:

The decisive thing — not as a psychological but as a public fact — was rather different. Jesus found himself left alone, not only by his people, but by the one to whom he had constantly appealed as no one did before him. Left absolutely alone. Once again, we do not know what Jesus thought and felt as he was dying. But it was obvious to the whole world that he had proclaimed the early advent of God in his kingdom and this God did not come. A God who was man's friend, knowing all his needs, close to him, but this God was absent. A Father whose goodness knew no bounds, providing for the slightest things and the humblest people, gracious and at the same time mighty; but this Father gave no sign, produced no miracles. *His Father* indeed, to whom he had spoken with a familiarity closer than anyone else had known, with whom he had lived and worked as a unity beyond the ordinary, whose true will he had learned with immediate certainty and in light of which he has dared to assure individuals of the forgiveness of their sins: this Father of his did not say a single word. God's witness was left in the lurch by the God to whom he had witnessed.

No wonder we sing on this dreadful day, "sometimes, it causes me to tremble."

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We moderns have a difficult time imagining what a shock this must have been, in part because we know that the verdict of Good Friday was not final. But there is more to our difficulty than that. We have domesticated God. We worship the God we want, a God who confirms our politics and our values, a God whose sovereign judgment conforms to our own, one whose mercy, we are convinced, will always outrun his justice, or so we hope.

A colleague likes to characterize the situation of the church today as trying to figure out what to do when fear no longer works to define ecclesial identity. I always respond: What makes you think fear is not a necessary part of discipleship? A God

whose judgment does not invite fear is not the God whom Jesus revealed. Jesus warned about God's judgment repeatedly. The Good Friday accounts remind us never to be too confident about our assessments of what God demands, never to be too sanguine about how far his mercy extends, never to be too convinced we have closed the gap between God's understanding and our own. Good Friday turned all human presumptions upside down. It still does.

The inscrutability of God's will. This is one of the things rereading Kung's treatment of the Passion brings to the fore. Good Friday reminds us of the limits of our reason as we seek to understand God's will. No novelist would dare conceive of such a story. No person, living then or living now, can consider the crucifixion of Jesus as anything but a cause for silence and dread. We must do our best to understand the demands of faith, but always be ready to acknowledge the limits of our understanding:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,"
declares the Lord.

"As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts" ([Isaiah 55:8](#)).

Let us tremble before the cross today, both at how little we understand, and at the dreadful punishment laid upon Jesus for our sake.