

God of the Mountain

A Reflection on the Meaning of the Cross-Bill Loader

Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing (Luke 23:34)

But we know - do we?

The spike of the club had pierced her right temple. Inside the brain was now pressed to the left side by the blow, the right side filled with blood, preserved in the frozen corpse, a human sacrifice from Inca times found atop Mount Ampato in Peru. The museum video in Arequipa explained how the 12 year old girl will have been prepared to die for her people, will have trekked many kilometres to her last moment. She would die to appease the angry god of the mountain. Then the famine would break. Her people would be saved. A little Jesus above the Amazon - or so it seemed in the National Geographic video.

And here on Golgotha another god appeased? God's own son made to suffer a violent death by his father, to appease the father's anger and save us all? Or so it seems in much that we hear and say. Gods of violence sanctioning people of violence. No forgiveness without revenge - on someone, as long as it is on someone. A matter of honour, ensuring punishments are enacted, penalties paid in full. Is our God of the "hill far away" related to the God of the mountain far away? Is that what the cross is about? Is that what we know? Close the books, the debt is paid, ledger balanced, all is forgotten, we are safe from the anger of the mountain god. This young man was spiked for us and for our sins.

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What if God is not like that? What if God is not trapped by the rules of honour and punishment? What if God just loves and is free to forgive without having to punish us or someone else in our place? What if God is like the father in the parable who ran to embrace his son and didn't have to beat him or anyone else in his stead before doing so? What if God isn't the mountain god who needs appeasing but by his nature wants to love, to create, to renew, to restore? What if Jesus embodies that love and shows it willing to endure even to the end? What if it is God whom we see in Jesus willing to love to the end? What if God is not the killer but the killed?

What if the killing god is the god of the killers, determined not to love, wanting to discard the troublemaker, unwilling to leave room for generosity that will not be tamed by the rules of punishments, the debts of accounting, by the principles of honour and appeasement?

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Why do we hatch up explanations which protect the dignity of a killing, punishing, vengeful God? Why do we want to say God could only love by first finding a victim to appease his honour, to take his punishment, to balance his debts? Why do we want a God who had to be paid off? Why are we afraid of just being loved? How does it benefit us to ensure the sums are done and the generosity is not pure generosity? Why must God be a mountain god? Is it because we can then have a sense of control; the sums are done, the books are balanced, we can close the books? Does it give a subtle sense of control where we can say: "Well the penalty has been paid, so we can now claim forgiveness by right?" Is it because it allows us still to hold on to our own ways of violence and calculation, our own demands that people appease us or pay for it?

What if God just keeps coming, keeps opening the books, keeping challenging us with love and hope, keeps looking into our eyes, keeps accompanying our frailty and our failures? Do we want to walk away from God, from finished business, paid off debts, secured bonds which will promise us paradise? What if the real gift is not paradise but God? What if salvation is not finished business but an ongoing relationship of love and hope?

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What if we see on this cross not a transaction with an offended mountain god, but a revelation at a moment of time of the love which is eternally in the heart of God, lived out in the long trek of Jesus? What if we smile at our failed and compromised images of paid penalties, sacrificial blood, ransoms, and punishments, all of which reflected some truth but also distorted it, and see in this historical moment a climax of lived love and lived hate, of the gods of religion and the God of compassion, of the political suppression of change and the unwillingness to recant on care? Then he died for us, against us, within us, before us - in a moment frozen in time for all time. And perhaps, then, we begin to know.

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