

**STRANGE POWER, JOHN 18:1-19:42**  
**APRIL 6, 2007—GOOD FRIDAY**  
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There is something offbeat about this day, Good Friday. What could possibly be good about the day the savior of the world was executed? The fact that the answer to that question is not immediately obvious tells us something.

Nor is it just the day. You could say there's something offbeat about the entire Christian faith. Ever since Constantine's baptism made Christianity socially acceptable, the Christian religion at its best has been at odds with the host culture.

This dissonance isn't new but it is good to recall in a sanctuary like this where it is easy to assume that the place and purpose of our faith equates with what stands for power and privilege in the world.

If Easter is the day we celebrate the eternal God, Good Friday, says theologian William Placher, is the day we honor a vulnerable God.<sup>[i]</sup> Therein lies the reason for the dissonance.

Who ever heard of a vulnerable God? How can a God be vulnerable? Gods from ancient cultures are invulnerable. Even in the Hebrew Scriptures.

But this view of God is turned inside out in the New Testament. At the end of the story, the Book of Revelation begins with the vision of seven messages written on seven scrolls for seven churches but no one—in heaven or earth can open the scrolls until the conquering Lion of the tribe of Judah is perceived to be the one who can break the seals.

Then something strange happens, one of those great anomalies of Scripture. In the next verse, the narrator sees not a conquering Lion but a slaughtered Lamb who opens the closed seals so that the story can unfold.

John, the writer of Revelation, offers absolutely no explanation for this shift. Some commentators say this is just confusing the animal imagery in which the Lion as the helper of the Messiah and the Messiah who is a Lamb get conflated.

But another view is closer to the truth. It is as if John were saying to us: "wherever the Old Testament says Lion, read Lamb. Wherever the Old Testament speaks of the victory of the Messiah or the overthrow of the enemies of God, we are to remember that the Gospel recognizes no other way of achieving these ends than the way of the Cross."

The dissonance of our faith, grounded in the vulnerability of God, occurs wherever worldly power is found from Babylon to Israel, from Beijing to Washington.

Good Friday presents the dramatic contrast of two kinds of power: worldly power and the strange power of a vulnerable God residing in the life of one man, Jesus. The language and symbols of the world's power and the authority of those who claim it are undercut by this solitary figure nailed to a cross.

Nor is this the message of Good Friday alone but of Jesus' entire life. His entire ministry was one long dissonant note against the cacophony of civilization's struggles for power.

The dissonance starts with the use of the term ‘evangelion’ or ‘good news’—the title for the four biographies of his life called Gospels. In the Greek, the term ‘evangelion’ was used for the news of victory in battle or amnesty on the accession of a new sovereign.

But no sooner does the Spirit descend upon this Jesus and a voice proclaim him God’s beloved son than the same Spirit drives him into the wilderness. Something is up. This is not the evangelion du jour of conquering hero and military conquest.

From the start his peculiar and paradoxical teachings and astounding healing ministry signal that a new power is loose in the world. And the religious authorities and Roman overlords sense it like rats on a sinking ship.

When the power that made the universe is brought to bear upon the poor and outcast, traditional liturgies of healing are discarded. Nowhere do we see Jesus the political revolutionary as clearly as we see him in the act of healing. Touching lepers and spitting on the tongues of deaf men—these are remedies that were ritually polluting and physically disgusting to his contemporaries.

When the leader of a synagogue asks for his help in curing his daughter, Jesus makes Jairus wait while he tends to a woman who has been suffering from menstrual hemorrhaging. Every protocol of the medical establishment is broken:

Jesus postpones raising the child from the dead for a comparatively trivial cure whose healing and physical character, the cultural taboos of the time would have kept invisible; he turns from the socially important male to heal this nameless woman; and he responds to the woman’s ritually polluting touching of the hem of his robe with praise for her faith.

Just who is this Jesus of Nazareth? The Gospels are literary masterpieces that say two things at once to the struggling early church: yes, this is the Messiah the greatest of all miracle workers, but no that does not mean everything you think it means. It is a ‘yes/no’ that bears repeating in our age and every age.

The irony the Gospels use to tell his story and make their paradoxical “yes but no” point is rich. Yes, Messiah. No, not the Messiah you thought.

He enters Jerusalem on a little colt—it is a humble and slightly silly ride yet the fulfillment of messianic prophecy. He is anointed as were the kings of old, but by an unnamed woman in an act that generates controversy and foretells his death. He sorrowfully ascends the Mount of Olives accompanied by three followers who protest their loyalty, only to be betrayed by a trusted friend. He receives the wardrobe of a king--purple cloak and crown so that soldiers can bow down in mockery.

All the while the readers of this story are given a new perspective on worldly power: the religious authorities, the people and Pilate are the ones on trial. The scribes and high priests, fastidious and preoccupied with the festival of the Passover lamb are preparing for the death of the Lamb of God.

The people, demanding Jesus’ crucifixion justify their actions disclaiming any king but Caesar and end up rejecting the very God of the Passover to reject Jesus.

Pilate, representing the power of political authority is the one on the stand as he interrogates Jesus, yet succumbs helplessly to the will of the people.

While the people of Jesus' day missed the irony, we see it. But whereas they were real actors in the drama of his life and we are invited to be, too often we stand on the sidelines feeling disconnected from the strange power of this vulnerable God.

The crowning literary and spiritual genius of this story is that we are invited to see Jesus' divinity precisely as he dies on the cross which is the final irony: our God, the common criminal.

As Frank Kermode says it feels like a story designed to turn every insider into an outsider and every outsider into an insider. Only power turned inside out could have such an effect.

C.S. Lewis once said that human beings seek power because they are afraid of weakness, afraid of what might happen should they be vulnerable, and so the drive for power that looks like an expression of freedom is really, in truth, an expression of fear.

Our insecurities about the consequences of compassion are not illusory. People get hurt all the time in the march for justice, in the cause of peace, on the front lines of social change and transformation. This happens not only to the great leaders and change agents of our time but also to legions of such leaders everywhere the light of Christ flickers in a human heart.

Ultimately today is about standing in the transforming tradition of the strange power of the Cross. Knowing that while there are limits to the suffering that we can embrace, or our willingness even to do so, we trust in a God who will bear whatever cost in suffering faithfulness requires.

Such trust has enabled followers of Jesus to take risks for the transformation of their neighborhoods and the world that they otherwise would not dare.

There will be time the day after tomorrow to rejoice in the eternal consequences of this confrontation between the world's power and the strange power of a vulnerable God.

Tonight the simple act of contemplating Christ's offbeat life, in the eyes of his culture and ours, is enough.

How will the story end? Can anything overcome worldly power? The answers to those questions will be found to the extent that we choose to trust the strange power of a vulnerable God. Amen.

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<sup>[i]</sup> Gratitude to William C. Placher's provocative *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994).