

**THE POWER TO UNMASK**  
**MATTHEW 27: 32-50**  
**MARCH 29, 2002 GOOD FRIDAY**  
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Last Saturday night Carol and I attended the Irish Classical Theatre's production of "Wit" – a contemporary play about a woman dying of ovarian cancer which Doug King elegantly referred to last Sunday. Buffalo's own Lorna Hill plays the woman.

"Wit" won a Pulitzer Prize in 1999. It captured your clergy's imagination.

In "Wit" Ms. Hill plays an erudite professor of English literature, Dr. Vivian Bearing – a woman of high standards, significant accomplishments and a command of 17<sup>th</sup> century poetry second to none. The play's title comes from the term used to describe the cleverness of the metaphysical poets who explored the paradox and ambiguity of religious faith and doctrine.

But Professor Bearing also possesses formidable wit – scintillating, sharp, in control at first, then deeply compassionate and human at the end.

It occurred to me, as we watched the painful unfolding of Professor Bearing's diagnosis and treatment, that what we were seeing was a modern day crucifixion.

Slowly, inexorably, Professor Bearing's dignity and self-respect are attacked not only by her disease but also by the medical establishment. Like a firefly caught in a glass jar she can communicate with and see the outside world – the land of the living, but she is encased by the deathly reality of her circumstances, a war between her doctors and her disease.

Each time she manages to climb to the top of the side of the jar, she arrives only to discover the tight lid either of her cancer or of arrogant health care professionals oblivious to her feelings as a human being. She is prisoner to a medical-research establishment that subjects her to the latest arsenal of drugs and theories more for their gain than her cure.

Professor Bearing says her crucifixion by chemotherapy is like being a freshman taking a final exam, time running out, yet not even knowing the question.

Her impulse at this juncture of disease and treatment and impending death is, she says, to hide – just as she accuses one of her metaphysical poets, John Donne, of doing when he follows the trail of his questioning of God to its logical end – the edge of existential abyss.

Professor Bearing writhing and lifeless on her hospital bed, teetering between life and death, between something and nothingness, curls into a whimpering ball, pulls the covers over her head and hides. An impulse reminiscent of Jesus when he said, "O God, let this cup pass from me."

We think of crucifixion as a cruel form of first century execution reserved for enemies of the state.

But "Wit" reminds us this Good Friday crucifixion can happen anywhere and anytime – even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – wherever power is used to decimate human worth and dignity and extinguish life.

All the more remarkable then, given this cruel form of punishment and death that it was through such an instrument that God chose to reveal his most precious gift – Jesus’ unconditional love.

Reflecting on the meaning of Good Friday John Buchanan says it is to be found in a notion that runs profoundly counter to our culture: namely, that the strange power of love is revealed in weakness.<sup>i</sup>

The contrast between what the cross represents and how institutions – from the medical/research establishment to corporate America to our government to the church itself – this contrast between the strange power of love revealed in weakness and the obvious power of institutions revealed in their ability to control human lives is sharply drawn when we contemplate Jesus’ dying on a cross outside Jerusalem amidst the city’s refuse and garbage.

Buchanan offers two contrasting images representing the power of human institutions and the strange power of love: St. Peter’s Basilica and Michelangelo’s Pieta. If you have been to St. Peter’s you know the awesomeness of the place. For centuries, and in many respects today, the Roman Catholic Church acted like an empire wielding military and economic influence.

Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in the plaza outside St. Peter’s Basilica – the largest church in the world. An ecclesiastical Pentagon of symbolism and size. The plaza is surrounded by three-tiered colonnades of Bernini, one of the most beautiful, most aesthetically satisfying artistic creations in Western civilization. The site exudes power.

Yet, inside the doors of St. Peter’s is another symbol of power, but a radically different kind of power: Michelangelo’s Pieta – a beautiful woman cradling in her arms the lifeless body of her son. Noisy tourists become suddenly quiet in front of Michelangelo’s masterpiece, pondering the young man who is the reason for all of this – dead, enfolded in his mother’s outstretched arms.<sup>ii</sup>

Fred Buechner explores this strange power of love revealed in weakness. “Of all the powers, love is the most powerful and the most powerless. It is the most powerful because it alone can conquer that final and most impregnable stronghold which is the human heart. It is the most powerless because it can do nothing except by consent.”<sup>iii</sup>

Just a few days ago we held a memorial service here for a member of Westminster. One of his grandsons spoke on behalf of the family. With great affection and stirring passion he told us of his deep love and admiration for his grandfather, how his grandfather remained faithful and loyal to him even through the most difficult years of his adolescence and young adulthood.

Then the young man said something quite remarkable, he said, “my grandfather’s death unmasked me to myself.” Even and especially in death the love of that grandfather conquered the stronghold of that young man’s heart. That friends, is the essence of Good Friday. The power of God’s fierce love revealed not in legions of angels but in his son’s gruesome death and utter weakness unmasks us to ourselves.

Such is our self-deceit that until God's Holy Spirit uses some prize winning play or masterpiece of a Pieta or beloved mentor of the soul until then we conduct our lives and construct our relationships content with the masks we wear, perhaps not cognizant even of our own disguise.

But then we hear the story once more of God's son led away from the stripping and beating before Pilate and the people, wearing a makeshift crown of thorns, jeered at as "King of the Jews"; given sour wine to quench his thirst, having his sole possession a robe divided among his executioners, placed between convicted felons, passersby wagging their heads and hurling insults, taunting and spitting at him, finally, gasping what little air he could to stave off suffocation crying out to the God he loved and served.

So deep is our self-deceit, says one preacher that any God too good to get his hands a little bloody, unwilling to stoop or suffer, cannot do me much good. Beneath the masks we wear we are all natural born killers, he says. The question this night is are we willing to let ourselves be unmasked.

A controversial new exhibit at the Jewish Museum in Manhattan gets at that question another way – by exploring artists' responses to evil. The show has stirred controversy because it uses Nazi symbols not to condemn Nazi ideology and fact of the holocaust but to reflect to the viewer of the art his or her own complicity in the act of destroying life.

The show deals not with the victim but the victimizer's viewpoint by making the viewer a participant in the "construction of destruction," says the curator.

"Every one of these artists puts you in a morally ambiguous space," he says. "There is no longer a safe distance between the viewer and the art. And maybe that is an even more important message at a moment when 'evil' has become just an unambiguous sound bite."<sup>iv</sup>

Saying much the same thing nearly two thousand years ago St. Augustine reflecting on his decision to watch a couple of barnyard cocks in bitter battle just outside his front door recognized his complicity in the destruction of life, "I chose to watch," he said, "and that is evidence of my sin."

If you come away from this night, aware like Augustine, of your sin; if you come away like that grandson – youthful pride unmasked to himself by his grandfather's devotion; if you come away from here tonight like Peter conscious of your own self-deceit, then the strange power of love revealed in weakness, unfolded in this service of shadows, will have succeeded in its design.

Then, the impregnable stronghold of your heart may open of its own consent, like the outstretched arms of Michelangelo's Mary, cradling her broken and dead son.

Such is the strange power of this night to penetrate our hearts,  
unmask us to ourselves,  
and in so doing prepare us to receive the stunning truth and transformation  
of Easter morning. Amen.

## **Endnotes:**

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<sup>i</sup> John M. Buchanan, "Mysterious Power," The Christian Century, March 13-20, 2002, page 3.

<sup>ii</sup> Buchanan, 3.

<sup>iii</sup> Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (New York: Harper and Row, 1972) 53.

<sup>iv</sup> "Bringing Nazi Symbols to the Jewish Museum," ARTnews, March 2002, p. 46.