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PUT YOUR HAND IN MY SIDE...

Meditation on the Scars of Jesus

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“After eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in their midst, and said, ‘Peace be unto you’. Then he said to Thomas, ‘Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing’. And Thomas answered, ‘My Lord and My God’. (John 20:26-28)

When after his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his badly frightened, and dejected disciples, He showed them His scars. He ate fish with them, spoke to them and rolled up His sleeves and opened His robe to show them His actual scars in hands and side.

One of the things this story illustrates is that Jesus truly “has come and remains in the flesh”. One of the heresies of the early church was the Docetic teaching. Docetism, from the Greek word *Dokeo*- def. ‘to seem’, is the teaching that Jesus only seemed to be Incarnate, He really wasn’t ‘in the flesh’, He didn’t really suffer anything, (God cannot suffer) and He only seemed to be Incarnate. The Koran of Islam incorporates Docetic teaching, in their emphatic denial that Jesus didn’t really die on the cross, Judas died in his place! The Surrealist painter Salvador Dali did a version of the Last Supper, which featured a Docetic Jesus- in the painting, you can see right through Him to the wall behind him!

This story and indeed much of the resurrection narrative in John’s gospel would be an antidote to this heresy. Truly, Jesus Christ has come (and remains) in the flesh! The elements of the Gospel are so physical! The cross, the heavy stone rolled across the grave, the fact that John had to stoop to enter the tomb on that resurrection morning, the sight of the empty grave clothes, which made both John and Peter instantly believe. One can almost smell the breakfast that Jesus cooked on a coal fire for the disciples, the fish Jesus ate in their presence, and of course the scars in Jesus hands and side, “Handle me...” The Gospel of Jesus is far from ethereal; it is set in this world of time, space,

matter, dates, historical events, and persons, “He was crucified under Pontius Pilate...”

Peter and John, we are told, both believed upon seeing the empty grave clothes, but for Thomas it was the sight of the scars of Jesus, that made him into a believer. It was upon seeing those scars that this monotheistic, devout Jew made an otherwise unthinkable profession, “My Lord and my God!”

What kind of a God is the God of Thomas and the apostles? God as a human? A scarred God? A God who allows his human enemies to inflict upon Him scars? We worship a God who has entered completely into the human condition, with all of its joys as well as all of its sorrows.

What is it to be human, if not to be scarred? Who hasn't borne the scars of disappointment, guilt, shame, frustration, futility, and betrayal time and again in this life? To be human is inevitably to be hurt, whether the wounds be self-inflicted or through the sinfulness of others, as Jesus said, “It is impossible but that offenses should come.”

But in the Gospel we see that the God we worship has entered into the suffering of humanity, the cross was an identification with us, in guilt, shame, penalty and agony. The scars of Jesus bear witness to this.

One of the qualifications of Jesus as our heavenly high priest is his ability to know first hand our limitations, temptations and the suffering that sin has caused to abound in our world. Jesus sits at the right hand of God in heaven and bears the scars of the cross!

Paul warned us that the Gospel of the scarred God would be a scandal to both Greek and Jew. The Greeks believed that ‘the true God’ would be pure spirit- pure logic- impassable (beyond and incapable of suffering) and completely transcendent, unknowable. To the Jews, God is (and can only be) the omnipotent, invincible, awesome God of power and might! Where is the wisdom in a crucified God? How could an all-powerful God be scarred? What philosophical answers could there be in a Divine “man of sorrows, acquainted with grief?”

“The Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: but we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness.”
(1 Cor. 1:22-23)

Neither Jew or Greek can discern in Jesus' scars what Thomas did. They saw no power, nor wisdom in the crucified, scarred God. To see what Thomas

and countless millions have seen down through the ages takes a revelation from God. If you can see God in the scarred, crucified Jesus, if you can see the power of God and the wisdom of God in the cross, that is the sign that you are "being saved".

"But unto those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the Wisdom of God" (I Cor. 1:24)

To the demand of sinful man for answers to the problem of evil, death and suffering, God doesn't offer a philosophy, or a definitive and satisfactory thesis, he presents Jesus crucified, as the answer.

To the oft-raised complaint that rises from sinners - "If God is an all powerful being...how could he allow...(fill in the blank)? Where was God at Dachau, or at Treblinka? Where was He on 9-11? When will this supposed God show us His power and Love?" The reply from heaven is nothing more or nothing less than the "despised and rejected ...man of sorrows, fully acquainted with grief", Jesus and His scars. Can you see the Wisdom and power in this?

What answer for suffering and evil would satisfy man anyway? If he eradicated all evil right now by His power (He could do this!) He would have to destroy everybody! Evil is not a substance out there somewhere; it is a plague that thrives in the hearts of all men everywhere.

The God given answer and the power is revealed in that, to save sinful man, He would become a man and enter into our suffering, He would take responsibility before God for our sins. The scars of Jesus testify to this.

Edward Shillito "got it". He was an English Christian who endured the horrors of the First World War, and afterward wrote a poem which speaks powerfully to the meaning of Jesus' scarred hands and side; He called it *JESUS OF THE SCARS*,

**If we have never sought, we seek Thee now;
Thine eyes burn through the dark, our only stars;
We must have sight of thorn pricks on Thy brow;
We must have thee, O Jesus of the scars.**

**The heavens frighten us; they are too calm;
In all the universe we have no place;
Our wounds are hurting us, where is the balm?
Lord Jesus, by Thy scars we claim Thy grace.**

**If when the doors are shut, Thou drawest near,
Only reveal those hands, that side of Thine;
We know today what wounds are, have no fear,
Show us the scars, we know the countersign.**

**The other gods were strong, but thou wast weak;
They rode, but thou didst stumble to a throne,
But to our wounds, only God's wounds can speak,
And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.**

One day soon, the Jews who so seek a sign will actually have a "Thomas experience". They don't believe in Jesus right now, He wasn't powerful enough for them, He was crucified - He didn't bring peace to the World, so they can't see God in Him! But we are told by the Prophet Zechariah, that in the last days, *"...They shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and shall mourn for Him as an only son, and shall be in bitterness for him as one is in bitterness for his firstborn..." (Zech. 12:10)*

Like Thomas, seeing the scars of Jesus will cause them to believe, and own Him as "Lord and God". We are told that on that day a fountain shall open up for cleansing,

"In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and uncleanness." (Zech 13:1)

Thus the picture in John of the handling of Jesus' scars is a picture of the consummation of history, the final salvation of Israel and the end of the world. What a God! What a Savior! My Lord and My God!