

## *Why Didn't He?*

When we read the accounts of this night's supper, betrayal, arrest, rigged trial, and tomorrow's execution, they're such familiar passages that it's easy to overlook the strangeness of these stories in the gospels.

Jesus knew that the religious leaders in the Temple were angry with him. He had exposed their hypocrisy. He had pointed out their shallowness. He had rebuked them for teaching that strict adherence to tiny details of the law was more righteous than caring for one another. He knew that the Romans couldn't tolerate any popular leaders who weren't under their thumb. He knew that Judas was disappointed that he wasn't leading a revolt to overthrow the Romans. So, why didn't he leave town and go hide until things settled down? Jesus knew that if his followers truly lived as he had taught, they too would face anger and persecution. He had taught in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are you when people revile you. . ." (Matt 5:11) Jesus had to live what he taught. And now, Jesus had to show his followers how to deal with persecution.

When a crowd came to arrest Jesus, Peter tried to make a preemptive strike. Perhaps he thought that striking the first blow would cause the crowd to turn and run from surprise and fear. In any event, he cut off the right ear of a servant of the high priest. (Matt. 26:51-53) Jesus had taught "Do not resist an evildoer. Turn the other cheek. Love your enemies" Now Jesus added the admonition that if we live by the sword, we will perish by the sword. He said, "If I appealed to my Father he would send twelve legions of angels to protect me" "It'd be no contest! We could continue with an eye for an eye, sword against sword. We'd win, at least according to the way people have always done things. But this isn't what I've taught you." And then Jesus lived as he had taught. He healed the man whose ear had been cut off.

Jesus was hauled off to stand before the High Priest, before Herod, and before Pontius Pilate. Each time he stood silently. He refused to refute those who accused him. He didn't argue his case. The one who cast out demons most certainly could have summoned them. The one who raised Lazarus from the dead could have struck Pilate dead. Why didn't he? Jesus had taught, treat other people in the way that you would like to be treated. He hadn't said treat people the way that they treat you. The African-American spiritual gets to the heart of the matter; "He Never Said a Mumbalin' Word." Slaves know that any response is seen as defiance. Any protest is seen as resisting authority, and then those who persecute you can tell themselves and others, "He showed no respect. He was defiant and resisted authority. He was inciting rebellion and we had to silence him to preserve the peace. Jesus gave them no excuse to rationalize their behavior. Jesus didn't antagonize them with protests, with retribution, or even with truth. It would have only driven them further down the evil path they were on.

The soldiers took Jesus and called out the whole unit to see him. They stripped him, put a scarlet robe on him, gave him a reed for a scepter and thorns for a crown. They mocked him, spat on him, and struck him with the reed. But Jesus said nothing. As he had taught, he didn't throw pearls of wisdom to swine.

Then, in the morning, the soldiers took him out to execute him. The Romans had developed crucifixion into a finely honed evil art. It was designed to be extremely painful, a horrible and slow death. To add to all of the physical agony was the emotional torture. It was public. You were naked. You lost control of your dignity, your bodily functions, and in the pain, you often lost control of your mind. Crucifixion was common. It was a tool that the Romans used to control the people they conquered. Don't give us any excuse, don't resist, don't

rebel, and don't even murmur – because this is what we will do to you. Jesus knew what this was going to be like. Why didn't he call down the twelve legions of angels at this point? Why didn't he summon fire from heaven like Elijah did on Mount Carmel? Think how impressive it would have been! I would have. You would have, too. But Jesus had taught, "Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you." And so he prayed, "Father, forgive them."

Finally, Jesus hung there, racked with pain, exhausted, helplessly hanging there as proof that the Romans were in control. One paid dearly for not quaking in fear before the administration. One paid dearly for offending Rome's Jewish pets who ran the Temple. The criminal on one side of Jesus taunted him. The criminal on the other side said "I deserve to be here, but will you at least remember me?" He didn't beg for forgiveness. He asked for the smallest thing. I don't want to die forgotten. I don't want to be a wisp of life that blows away and isn't even remembered. All I ask is that you remember me. Jesus could have said, "I'll think about how you deserve this and your fate to come. I'll remember you, alright. I'll remember why you are being punished." Jesus could have said that, but instead he said, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Love your enemies. Forgive as you would like to be forgiven. Treat other people like you wish someone treated you.

Jesus had options. He could have left town before he was arrested. Jesus died because he stayed. He could have called down legions of angels to protect him at any point in this process. He died because he wouldn't return violence for violence. He could have damned those who accused him, damned them to hell, then and there. He died because he didn't. He could have struck down those who spat on him, mocked him, and flogged him. He died because he wouldn't resist those who were evil. He could have let a criminal get all that he deserved. Why didn't he? He didn't because that wasn't what he had taught. It wasn't the way of life that he had lived. It wasn't the example he had given or the teaching he had proclaimed. Why didn't he? He didn't because he was no hypocrite. He taught us how to live. And he died because he lived as he taught. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen