

Who Killed Jesus?

Some of us have had the opportunity to learn about how to communicate most effectively with other people, especially in tense or confrontative situations. One of the cardinal rules is to avoid “you language” and to stick to “I language.” (How many of you know what I’m talking about?) Let me see if I can think of an example. “Tom, why do you always leave your dirty dishes on the counter, instead of just putting them in the dishwasher?” The pronoun “you” can be like a barbed spear, certain to make me feel defensive and attacked. It’s as if Lois—I mean, the speaker ☺--were saying, “Tom, how could you be so stupid?” It would be way more effective if Lois—I mean, the speaker—would say something like, “Hey Tom, it would help me if dirty dishes were not left on the counter, but rather were loaded right into the dishwasher.” Do you catch the “subtle” yet critical difference? Lois?

Peter clearly hadn’t had that training. Or else he didn’t care. “You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us?” A more tactful Peter would have said something like, “My fellow Israelites, I’m concerned that my actions may have been misunderstood.” But then, I doubt where Peter cared one whit whether the Israelites were feeling defensive or attacked. After all, how could they be so stupid, to think that he and John had healed the lame man by their own power? Did they still not realize who Jesus was? Did they not understand that when Peter and John healed the man “in the name of Jesus,” it was Jesus’ power that healed him, and not theirs? Duh! But Peter was only just getting started. Verse 14: “But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One.” Verse 15: “And you killed the Author of life.” Ouch! Isn’t he exaggerating just a bit? It wasn’t the Israelites that killed Jesus. It was the Roman soldiers who hammered the nails into his hands and feet.

On the shelves in my office is a book by John Dominic Crossan entitled “Who Killed Jesus?” And he makes the same point. It wasn’t the Israelites—that is, the Jews—that killed Jesus. And to imply that it was runs the risk of demonizing an entire group of people. Tragically, Crossan says, that is exactly what has happened. Ever since New Testament times, the Jewish people have been blamed for the death of Jesus. And we all know where that led. Six million Jewish deaths in Nazi concentration camps during World War II.

Sadly, anti-Semitism didn’t stop there, but continues today. Largely because the New Testament appears to pin the crucifixion on the Jews. Not only here, in the third chapter of Acts, but in all four of the gospels as well. John being the worst. The word “Jew” or “Jews” appears sixty-six times in the gospel of John, a large majority of which are negative or accusatory in some way. “The Jews were looking for an opportunity to kill him” (John 7:1). “The Jews took up stones again to stone him” (John 10:31). “The Jews cried out, ‘If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor’” (John 19:12).

All right then, if it wasn’t the Jews, then who killed Jesus? John Dominic Crossan says it was Rome. Which is another way of saying it was the dominant political power of the day. Which is another way of saying, “the emperor did it.” Sure, the Roman soldiers did the hammering, but they were merely carrying out orders from above. Jesus died because he was a direct threat to the power of the Roman emperor. And not just because he had been hailed by the crowds as “King of the Jews,” a claim Jesus himself denied. The fact is, his teachings were

politically subversive, a claim he doesn't try to deny, a message he doesn't try to hide or keep quiet. From his Sermon on the Mount to his "Palm Sunday" ride on a donkey. When John Howard Yoder titled his groundbreaking Magnum Opus *The Politics of Jesus*, he wasn't simply trying to sell books, or put Mennonites on the map (although that is what his book ended up doing). He was trying to be faithful to the gospel. The words of which continue to be as counter-cultural and subversive and political today as they were two thousand years ago.

Who killed Jesus? The emperor. That day's reigning world power. Which clues us in to whom we can safely and surely blame for today's evils. Namely today's reigning world power. [Clap hands clean.] Don't blame me; I didn't vote for him.

But back to Acts 3 for just a second. We can't so quickly and blithely write off Peter's accusations as being misdirected or anti-Semitic, let alone ill-advised from the standpoint of effective communication. His use of second person plural "you-language" was spot on. Only it wasn't just the Jews he was accusing.

Several weekends ago a number of us attended a conference at Bethel College called "Mennonites and the Holocaust." "Who killed the Jews?" was the implicit question being asked. The Nazis, right? [Clap hands clean.] That takes care of that. It certainly wasn't Mennonites!

Bit by bit, book by book, recent scholarship has been showing that quite a few Mennonites had dirty hands when it comes to the Holocaust. Granted, none of them may have pulled the trigger, or locked the shower room doors from the outside. But they were complicit in a whole range of ways. From merely remaining silent when they should have spoken out, to serving proudly as Nazi officers. Who killed the Jews? Well, our forebears did. More sobering, the conference speakers argued, we continue to kill them to the extent we continue to deny our own history. So it behooves us to work hard to rectify that, the speakers concluded. We should start today.

Who killed Jesus? We did. Granted, we weren't there that day. It was just as Peter said—it was the Jewish Israelites in the crowd that turned on him, that wanted to distance themselves from the suddenly and politically unpopular preacher. But if we had been there that day, let's face it: that would have been us. Moreover, we continue to kill Jesus to the extent that we too try to distance ourselves from his words and actions. We continue to murder Jesus whenever we insist that it's not the name of Jesus that has the power to heal, but rather, science. Sure, there's something to be said, in fact a lot to be said, for enlightened modernity, with all its so-called advances in the arts and sciences. But to deny the possibility and presence of divine power is just as stubborn and ignorant—just as much of a "duh" moment—today as it was for the crowds in Acts 3. When it comes to the name of Jesus, may we be the ones claiming it. Not to mention the ones being healed by it.

In the meantime, we can take comfort from this story in Acts 3. When Peter directly accuses the Israelites of rejecting Jesus, he could hardly have forgotten that he himself had denied Jesus three times. And now here he was, a former fisherman, performing miracles in Jesus name! No wonder he eventually allowed that the Israelites had merely acted in ignorance, and now they simply needed to repent to receive forgiveness and refreshment from the Lord. I'll take some of that forgiveness and refreshment!

In the name of the Lord. Amen.