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*Reading in the Time of Coronavirus*

Mystics & Skeptics

Jefferson and Lincoln on Good Friday

By: Reverend Charles Brock  
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Two important presidents had similar and dissimilar views on Jesus, his life, and death. The similarities included their Unitarian views that Jesus was the finest moral teacher of all time but not divine. They also wanted to free slaves – Jefferson thought all Americans were slaves to the King, and America needed a revolution to overthrow the British occupation, and Abraham Lincoln did free the African American slaves. They were not for equality with black people. Though Thomas Jefferson had numerous chattel slaves, he realized that America could not long tolerate the continuation of formalized slavery and said in a strongly worded statement showing his belief in Providence:

Indeed I tremble for my country. When I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever: that considering numbers, nature and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation, is among possible events; that it may become probable by supernatural interference!<sup>[1]</sup>

Jefferson had an odd view of Jesus and revolution. He was the only American president who went against the usual church teaching about Jesus with a statement that is still a minority view among scholars and churches. The main idea held by most Christians about Jesus is that he was the redeemer from sin and death for believers. Jefferson was not keen on any classical ideas of atonement but thought Jesus was not only a great moral leader, but an insurrectionist who wanted the Romans out of the Holy Land. He said that Jesus was “an early victim to the jealousy and combination of the altar and the throne.” He also said Jesus was “punished capitally for sedition by being gibbeted according to the Roman law.”<sup>[2]</sup> Jesus was killed on Good Friday because of the problems he posed for both the Romans and the Jewish religious establishment that favored Roman occupation.

Thomas Paine agreed that not only did Jesus preach the equality of mankind, he

also was an insurrectionist against slave-holding Rome. Paine wrote:

The accusation which those priests brought against him was that of sedition and conspiracy against the Roman government ... neither is it improbable that Jesus Christ had in contemplation the delivery of the Jewish nation from the bondage of the Romans.[3]

This was not a popular or even a considered view in most of the Christian history, and it is quite remarkable that Jefferson and Paine independently put it forward. I cannot find much contemporary commentaries on these points, but there is certainly plenty of discussion today in the seminaries, though not the churches, on the political role of Jesus.

Lincoln had no such view, and even dismissed the main event of the Hebrew Scriptures which is about the exodus – the coming out of Egypt celebrated by the Passover that is the most important historical and theological moment for Judaism and is used today in many freedom discussions that involve Western religion. Lincoln did not think this was relevant for America because Moses was too slow, and America could not wait a whole generation to free the slaves.

Many understand a mission of America is to be a helper for others on the search for freedom. Washington used the exodus analogy as did the earlier Puritans and innumerable sermons and political pamphlets during the revolutionary era: Washington wrote to the Jews of Savannah:

May the same wonder-working Deity, who long since delivering the Hebrews from their Egyptian oppressors, planted them in the promised land, whose providential agency has lately been conspicuous in establishing these United States as an independent nation, still continue to water them with the dews of heaven and to make the inhabitants of every denomination participate in the temporal and spiritual blessings of that people whose God is Jehovah.[4]

John Adams: "I always consider the settlement of America with reverence and wonder, as the opening of a grand scene and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant, and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth." [5]

There has been a strong emphasis on Moses and freedom for the Hebrews among American political commentators, especially among the Black slaves and their theologians, with an emphasis on Isaiah and Jesus as the bearers of that tradition in their own time. Jefferson's Second Inaugural Address:

I shall need, too, the favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our fathers, as Israel of old, from their native land and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessaries and comforts of life; who has covered our infancy with his providence, and our riper years with his wisdom and power.

Many Black spirituals take up the theme of "Let my people go," etc. The last public words of Martin Luther King, Jr. showed his identification with Moses and the exodus, echoing Moses' farewell words on Mount Nebo at the end of his life: "I've been to the mountaintop. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get

there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

Columnist and author David Brooks claimed that the Exodus tradition was the original American narrative, but now is largely forgotten: “The Puritans came to this continent and felt they were escaping the bondage of their Egypt and building a New Jerusalem.” It helped us with slavery and understanding our role in the world then and now. Recently, Brooks has changed his mind. These days, he writes, multiculturalism is the big idea of viewing America, and the old verities of Anglo-Saxon Protestantism and Enlightenment values that ruled the United States for so many years have taken a back seat.[6] I agree that we must value multiculturalism, but I do not want to lose the importance of the Exodus tradition. I see it as our major freedom narrative. It applies to current multicultural immigrants and refugees fleeing from oppression as well.

The other big issue for Good Friday is the classical notions of the death of Jesus. The church saw the crucifixion as the means of forgiveness. Lincoln had a view about atonement of Christ. When Congressman Orlando Kellogg came to the White House in the interests of a wounded soldier who had previously deserted, Lincoln, granting a pardon, asked a question: “Kellogg [...] isn't there something in Scripture about the ‘shedding of blood’ being ‘the remissions of sins?’”[7]

Lincoln struggled with the meaning of Christ’s atonement through blood, but blood sacrifice was and is fundamental to Christianity as it was to Judaism; the Passover lamb’s blood is smeared on the doorposts in Egypt to keep the plague of the killing of the first born away from the Jews, and Christians believe that Jesus shed blood for the redemption of the world from the cross. It is also interesting that Lincoln was assassinated on Good Friday 1865, and immediately preachers and others drew the parallels to Christ’s sacrifice. He not only died because of our sins, he also redeemed us from slavery and the guilt that went with it.

It also paints a picture of the struggle with our motives and lives. Nikos Kazantzakis in his fiery novel *The Last Temptation of Christ* sees Jesus as a model for us all. Without naming it, he uses St. Paul’s statement of the troubled mind in Romans 7: “For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin within me. Who will rescue me from this body of death?” In the Prologue, Kazantzakis writes:

Every man partakes of the divine nature in both his spirit and his flesh. That is why the mystery of Christ is not simply a mystery for a particular creed: it is universal. The struggle between God and man breaks out in everyone, together with the longing for reconciliation... the supreme purpose of the struggle – union with God: this was the ascent taken by Christ which he invites us to take as well, following in his bloody tracks... he is fighting at our side.[8]

The cross is the reconciler.

## THEOLOGY FOR TODAY:

Jefferson’s and Paine’s understanding of the insurrection of Jesus against Rome are forerunners of many revolutions, including the American Revolution for which

Jefferson was one of the authors of the Declaration of Independence. There is much we can do now for the American mission. Individuals have a thousand ways they can help but so can the state. Short of invading countries for “regime change,” which can be reckless, we can speak out and apply various economic pressures, publicize the persecution of religious minorities, discuss world income inequality, use the IMF and World Bank on nasty countries that treat their people dreadfully, publish and shame evil acts, strive for human rights, protect women in patriarchal countries, etc. And according to Ambassador Richard Haass, President of the Council on Foreign Relations: “Bolster weak states that cannot contend with terrorists, counter authoritarian powers’ interference in the democratic process, etc. [...] Such efforts will necessarily involve a mix of compromise, incentives, and pushback.”<sup>[9]</sup> The United States Agency for International Development has a federal grant program for foreign countries to assist them in providing humanitarian assistance or economic development that enhances American political or economic policies abroad. This can be very creative.

Lincoln’s reference to the blood of Christ and the remission of sins has resonated throughout the churches since the 1st century and parallels the Day of Atonement in Judaism. It is interesting that Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, used aspects of the Day of Atonement and the cross in his theories of transference – the patient piles his sins onto the analyst, who becomes the parent substitute, and the analyst bears them away like the scapegoat 3,000 years ago.

Finally, to see oneself as one of the messed-up people of the world because of conflicting goals or standards is what most every human goes through. We join the human race in acknowledging this. Jesus indeed can be a role model here.

Good Friday has many rhythms, and we might find meaning in them at various points in our lives to help us understand and enrich ourselves and others. It is dramatic. It shines with meaning.

– Rev. Charles Brock, *Holy Week 2021*

#### End Notes

1. Perden, William H ed.; *Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia* 1954 p 138, 163
2. Jefferson to his nephew Peter Carr Aug 10, 1787
3. Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason* Part First from Political Writings op cit p 213
4. W B Allen, [ed], *George Washington - A Collection*, 1988
5. Adams, *Dissertation on Canon and Feudal Law*, Diggins p 214
6. David Brooks, *The Unifying American Story*, NY Times March 21, 2017. He now calls for a multicultural narrative. Brooks, *Your Daily Dose of Optimism*, NY Times June 20, 2019
7. Wolf, William J; *Lincoln’s Religion*; 1970, p 84-5
8. Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Simon & Schuster, 1960, p 1-3
9. Richard Haass, *How a World Order Ends – and What Comes in Its Wake*, Foreign Affairs, Jan/Feb 2019 p 29

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