

The God Who Died on a Cross

Richard Oxenberg

How disappointing! That God would die on a cross!

Didn't we think this God would give us everything we wanted, that day he led us out of Egypt? Now here is a God, we said to ourselves, *worthy* of allegiance. Not like those piddling little gods of Egypt. Just look at what he can do. Turn the Nile river to a sea of blood. Rain death upon the first-born of our enemies. Part the Red Sea. Surely here is a God of awesome power. A God who can command all the elemental forces of nature. He speaks and the mountains skip like rams! He sighs and the heavens roar! Now here is a God who can fulfill all our desires. Have we not struck pay dirt? Have we not found the source of infinite wealth?...If only we can figure out how to get it from him.

Slaves of Egypt? – Hah! With our God we will be *masters* of Egypt. We will march back whence we came and turn all Egypt into *our* slaves. Won't they shake in their boots! Won't they give us all we ask? Oh, we are dreaming big, but why not? This God seems to like us. Look at how he has wreaked vengeance on our enemies. All we need do is keep on his good side. Yes, indeed, we have come into a bit of luck. And not a moment too soon! We have found the source of infinite wealth.

So we told ourselves.

Didn't we think we had him figured out? A little bit of this, a little bit of that. He doesn't like people to work on the Sabbath. Ok, no work on the Sabbath. He doesn't like people to eat pig. Well, never really liked the dirty little animals anyway. Ok, sure, he's a bit *particular*. I mean, these rules go on forever! And what are they for? Don't boil a kid in its mother's milk? Whatever you say, God of infinite wealth! If you had a hand we'd kiss it! If you had a shoe we'd shine it! Didn't we size him up, from the very start, as a *big tipper*?

And weren't we waiting for that big tip? Ok, so he's a bit *particular*. A little bit eccentric. Wealthy people always are. Ok, so he seems to be taking his sweet time about rewarding us. But didn't we see? Didn't we hear? This guy can part the Red Sea! (I mean, *the Red Sea*!) Surely such a being will not be stingy. Surely he will show us his largesse. For his own sake if not for ours. After all, such a big wallet must have a big ego attached. He wouldn't want to get the reputation of being chintzy. Maybe we just need to butter him up *a little longer*.

So we told ourselves.

Were we not happy? Were we not rubbing our hands in anticipation? Were we not shouting for delight? And then what does he go and do? This God of infinite wealth and power! He has himself born as a pauper and dies on a cross! Now *what is this*?

I tell you, this is not what we were expecting. God, listen, we don't want you to be like us, we want to be like you. We want to take upon ourselves your power and glory, we don't want you to take upon yourself our weakness and misery. I mean, it's very nice that you should want to see how the other half lives. Frankly, we wouldn't have thought you were all that interested. But did you have to go so far? I mean, dying on a cross like the most vile criminal? What were you thinking? Frankly, God, it just isn't dignified.

What's that you say? You want us to learn what is *worthy* of devotion? Oh but we know! And don't we know! I mean, *man*, when you socked it to the Egyptians didn't we see all the *worthiness* we could imagine? We were ready to follow you anywhere. "Now there is a God *worthy* of the name," we said to ourselves. Not like these piddling little Egyptian gods. You were impressive in those days, God.

But this Cross thing. What are we supposed to make of this?

Can it be...maybe...that you're *mad* at us? Oh that must be it! We did something to offend you and you're pissed. You're so pissed that you want to nail us to a cross. This is your way of saying it. Is that it? So what are you mad at us about? Somebody eating the wrong thing again? We know how particular you are about that. We'll stop that at once! Just tell us who and what.

What's that? Nobody eating the wrong thing? Ok, so...you want to nail us to a cross because...? I give up. Look, it just doesn't make sense. You see, what I don't understand is why, if you're mad at *us*, you should have *yourself* nailed to a cross.

Perhaps I need to think this through. Ok, God of infinite power, nailed to a cross. So, you're mad at us because...You know, I've got to tell you something, if I were mad at somebody I wouldn't have *myself* nailed to a cross. I mean, maybe I'd nail *him* to a cross but I wouldn't nail *myself* to a cross. What would be the point of that? And prove myself to be so weak? And prove myself to be so vulnerable? And prove myself to be so helpless? Before the very one who had offended me? What's the percentage in that? Would *that* get him to stop offending me? Not on your life! He'd only laugh the louder.

And you! You, who can part the Red Sea. Nailed to a cross? And, come to think of it, you don't look angry on that cross. Quite the contrary. And didn't you say "forgive them"? Forgive them for nailing you to the cross? Forgive them? What, no plagues? No worldwide flood? Not even a little slaughter of the first-born? Just "forgive them"?

Forgive them? Oh, God of infinite riches, you are so hard to figure out! Will you finally give us those infinite riches if we...forgive them?

Forgive them...it's not always easy to forgive. You know, you look very dramatic there nailed to a cross but there are others who've been nailed to a cross, in their own ways. I could tell you stories that would break your heart. No, it's not easy to forgive when

you've been really wounded. And I've been wounded in my life. Well, who hasn't? People can be pretty hard to take. Of course, I'm no saint either, but...

So you have to watch out for yourself! That's what I've learned. Can't count on anybody! And here I thought that you, with your infinite riches, might give me a little something to make it easier...and what do you do? Get yourself nailed to a cross. I mean, what is that?

Can't count on anybody. Just alone in this world. That's what it is to be a human being, in case you didn't know. Alone struggling to stay alive all by yourself. Nobody cares. And look at you. Nailed to a cross. So what good are you? Now you're no different from us. That's what becomes of us, you know. We nail each other to crosses. And you're lucky if you can nail them before they nail you. That's how it is in this world. So now you know. Now you know too what it is to be nailed to a cross, just like us.

Well, not quite like us – you of infinite riches – because you didn't have to get nailed, did you? – you who can part the Red Sea. So why? Why did you do it? Why join us in the muck, in the meanness and ugliness of human life? This can't be your idea of fun.

Lonely. Suddenly, God, I feel so lonely. Looking at you up there all alone reminds me of...how lonely it gets. It gets dark here, God. Dark, and you can't see anybody else. You're just by yourself with your thoughts in the darkness. That's what it is to be a human being. And nobody cares.

Isn't that remarkable, that nobody cares? I mean, *everybody* cares, right? Everybody cares about *themselves*. Everybody cares that nobody cares...*about them*. But nobody cares that *everybody* cares! Isn't that remarkable? I guess we're just wrapped up in ourselves. We're afraid someone will steal our little bag of riches, paltry as it is, so we hide in the dark so no one will see. Maybe you can't understand that, you of infinite riches.

But you don't look so very rich up there on that cross, do you? You look pretty destitute up there, my God. All by yourself. So now you know too – that nobody cares.

And yet. . . *You* look so full of cares, my Lord. So heavy with care. But what burdens can you have – you of infinite riches? What pain can you have – you who can part the Red Sea?

Unless...unless...

Our pain is – somehow – *also* yours?

Now here is something I had never considered: What is it, what is it...what is it in us that can *most* be pained? Is it not extraordinary there should be such a thing? Such loneliness, such desolation. Why not just rock and dust in this vast empty universe? Why this place in us that is too lonely for this world? Where has it come from. . . if not from *You*? And this very place, which can most be pained, is it not, also, that which can most feel joy and beauty and peace and warmth? Are these, then, but the light and dark sides...of *You*?

Oh, God of the Cross, is this why you are hanging there from that cross? – do you *know* our brokenness, do you *know* our pain, do you know...*my* pain?

My isolation, my longings, my poverty.

I've never confessed my poverty to anyone. Not even myself. But you, you there on the cross, you who share my brokenness. Can I... confess my poverty to You?

So, here we are, the two of us, two vagabonds, abandoned. You and me, and this, our cross. It's awful, but...no longer so unbearable. I mean, it's dark and cold but...we can keep each other warm. Who'd have thought, who'd have thought...that my pain might be Yours? And yet you look so full of pain, my Lord. So destitute on this cross of unrequited love. I haven't much to offer, but I can offer you an arm.

And now look, through the clouds – a streak of light. Just a sliver. But it's so beautiful. Rarely have I noticed it. But now...that sliver of moon and the flickering stars. My God, it's beautiful!

Oh but wait, there is something else! Now I see them, in the flickering light, lined up around us. Over the hills, across the plains, for miles and miles. I never noticed them before, not like this. So many others! Crosses upon crosses upon crosses. The rich and the poor, the healthy and the sick, the powerful and the weak – the crosses upon crosses upon crosses.

And an angry mob circling every cross, waving their fists, shouting their curses, raging and howling –

And the same faces in the mob as on the crosses!

We have done it to ourselves, haven't we? – our hatreds, our anger, our fears, our rage.

We visit death upon each other, and upon ourselves.

Now I see it.

And now I hear your words: "Father, forgive them – they know not what they do."

Is this what you would have us do – forgive one another?

Is this the path to the Love you speak of?

Yes, I feel it now, with every act of forgiveness, the peace of your Love.

This is why You have entered death with us.

You enter death with us that we may break the bonds of death with You.

I see it now.

Oh, my God! The parting of the Red Sea was something, but this...this is something else.

Oh, God of Love – you are not what I expected. I expected you to give me riches and you have shown me poverty. I expected you to give me power and you have shown me weakness. I expected you to give me triumphs and you have shown me defeat.

But you have shown me your Love in my poverty, your Love in my weakness, your Love in my defeats.

Your Love embracing all, conquering all, healing all – if only *we* will embrace it.

And now the dawn is breaking. The light is brightening. And the Cross – where is it? I see only a tree. I feel the pulse of life coursing through its trunk, its limbs, through me – I see the light showering through its leaves. It was always a tree, this Cross – the Tree of Life, become so twisted. But now look at the birds alighting on its branches! Listen to the music of their song! My God, we've come home.