

***Rebel with a Cause***  
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Ancient Witness: Luke 23:1-2

*Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. They began to accuse him, saying, “We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.”*

First, I need to tell you that what you are going to hear from me at this church is different from almost every other church. You just won’t find what I am going to say today in other churches around here. This is part of a progressive view of God and Christianity.

We were on vacation when one of my relatives gave me a publication of Father Stanley Rother, who was assassinated in 1981 while serving as a missionary in Guatemala. The publication was done by the diocese of Oklahoma, called, *The Sooner Catholic*, celebrated Rother’s elevation. In 2016 Pope Francis declared him to be a martyr for the faith, clearing the way for him to be beatified. She explained to me that this puts the priest on the “track to sainthood.” All that is needed are two verifiable miracles that are the result of the petitions and prayers of Rother.

I was amazed, though, in the entire publication devoted to Rother, there was no mention about *why* he was killed. It said only that in Guatemala there was a civil war with “the Catholic Church caught in between government forces and guerrillas.” This makes it sound like Father Rother was just in the wrong place at the wrong time—that it was just a random death.

But this completely ignores the historical and political reality of the actual situation.

During the 1980’s, many of you will remember, tens of thousands of innocent men, women and children were brutally killed by death squads, sponsored by the Guatemalan dictatorial regime and supported by the United States. This campaign of terror and murder was an attempt to squash the rebellion of poor and indigenous people, who were trying to remove a violent dictator. It was a shameful chapter in our nation’s history that the U.S. government and the CIA supported this violent and oppressive regime in the name of “stability” for the region.

This was the situation: Fr. Rother and many others, including some nuns and Archbishop Oscar Romero, were murdered because they stood in solidarity with the poor and against the injustices of the rich and powerful. They were seen as a threat to the government and were put on a hit list by its thugs. To ignore this historical and political reality is to sap all the meaning from these horrific executions. Indeed, it has been noted that the recitation of the Magnificat, Mary’s song of social justice, was made illegal during the same period of time in Guatemala because it was subversive and threatened the government that was controlled by wealth and power.

So yes, I say make Fr. Rother a saint! But not because of miracles and a random, senseless death. He deserves recognition because he courageously stood with the poor, preaching the unarmed love of God and the dignity of all human beings in spite of the threats and the violence that would come his way.

This strange disconnect between many of the martyrs, even Jesus, himself, and the political reasons *why* they died is a denial of the gospel, itself, it seems to me. Each death, including Jesus', becomes nonsensical without this context. They become heroes without a cause. And they represent a gospel that has become devoid of justice.

Several years ago, Reza Aslan came out with a new book, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*. Perhaps some of you have read it. His central point is that Jesus was very much a rebel with a cause, that he was, in fact, part of an armed revolutionary uprising in Palestine at the beginning of the first century of the common era. Aslan makes the point that crucifixion was a political form of execution used for the crime of sedition and treason. And these were certainly the charges that were leveled against Jesus. We read this morning that people accused him of undermining the empire and calling himself the Messiah, a liberator and a king. They put a sign on his cross, saying, "King of the Jews."

Aslan says that the gospel writers then transformed Jesus from this violent revolutionary to a peaceful spiritual leader, writing 40 to 60 years after the crucifixion. And they did this, Aslan asserts, because they were afraid of the wrath of Rome, having seen how it had utterly destroyed Jerusalem in 70 C.E.

Now, there are some things with which I agree with Aslan. No doubt, the gospel writers each had their own agenda and obscured and covered up things about Jesus. New Testament scholar, Robert Funk, said that the writings both "reveal and conceal" who Jesus actually was. And so, yes, Jesus was concealed, but not in the way Aslan claims.

For example, the first chapter of John's gospel, written later than the others, introduces Jesus with words attributed to John the Baptist: "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." The church in following generations build upon this and developed the atonement view of Jesus' death, centering on the belief that Jesus was sent by God to die so that sinful humans could be reconciled to God.

Jesus' sacrificial death, according to this view, atones for humanity's sin. Just as blood from a perfect, unblemished lamb placed on the doorposts of Jews in Egypt allowed God to "Passover" the Israelites and kill all Egyptian firstborn children (!), so too, the blood of Jesus who was born of a virgin and unblemished by sin allows God to pass over the sins of Christians who are saved by Jesus' blood sacrifice. And although the church has wrapped this interpretation in the language of love, the unspoken implication is that God's wrath could only be appeased through the blood sacrifice of a divine son.

This, it seems to me, was a huge distortion about who Jesus was and what he stood for. And *why* Jesus died became unimportant. It only mattered *that* he died, and his death was a kind of cosmic transaction to satisfy a blood-thirsty God. Walter Wink, another New Testament scholar,

wrote an amazing book about 30 years ago that had a profound influence on me. It was called, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*. He wrote:

*The God whom Jesus revealed as no longer our rival, no longer threatening and vengeful, but unconditionally loving and forgiving, who needed no satisfaction by blood—this God of infinite mercy was metamorphosed by the church into the image of a wrathful God who demand for blood atonement leads to God’s requiring of his own Son a death on behalf of us all. The nonviolent God of Jesus comes to be depicted as a God of unequalled violence... Against such an image of God the revolt of atheism is an act of pure religion. (p 149)*

The revolt of atheism against this violent image of God is an act of pure religion! So yes, the church has obscured who Jesus was! But not in the way that Aslan asserts. Aslan claimed that the gospel writers totally misrepresented the character of Jesus. The church turned Jesus into a mere sacrificial lamb, whose teaching had no relevance whatsoever.

And yes, I agree with Aslan that crucifixion was used for violent insurrectionists and revolutionaries, but other people got swept up, too. Fr. Rother and Archbishop Romero were crucified by their regimes, but they were not armed revolutionaries, either. Crucifixion was a blunt instrument of intimidation and social control.

And so, Jesus was confused with violent rebels, perceived as a physical threat and accused by others of insurrection. He was neither a spiritual good luck charm, a ticket to heaven if you just call him “Lord,” an object of faith or an atoning sacrifice for no reason or cause. Nor was he a violent revolutionary.

But there is a third option. He was a *nonviolent* revolutionary who revealed a nonviolent God, working to establish the peaceable kingdom that is marked by love, justice and the liberation from oppression. He was a rebel with a cause. Wink wrote,

*Not only did Jesus and his followers repudiate the autocratic values of power and wealth, but the institutions and systems that supported these values... every conceivable prop of domination, division and supremacy... (p. 110)*

This is why he was a threat and why he was executed.

*Looking back over Jesus’ ministry, what emerges with bracing clarity is the comprehensive nature of his vision... He was not a reformer, bringing alternative, better readings of the Law. Nor was he a revolutionary, attempting to replace one oppressive power with another. He went beyond revolution. His assault against the basic presuppositions and structures of oppression itself. Violent revolution fails because it is not revolutionary enough. It changes the rulers but not the rules, the ends by not the means. (p. 136)*

It is this Jesus we follow. Not a mindless sacrifice for no cause or reason other than a bizarre cosmic transaction. Not a violent revolutionary. But a nonviolent rebel with a cause—the cause

of a loving, nonviolent God. This is a path where, like Jesus, we embrace our weakness and our vulnerability to serve a God whose only power is love.

*(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)*