

“I Cry Out, ‘Violence!’”
Craig Keen

Response

“Where God Meets Humanity: A Response to Craig Keen”

by

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I dislike this topic. I *really* do. I do *not* want to hear about violence. And I am not sure I want to talk about it, because violence is not something that I merely see on the nightly news or read about in the newspaper. You see, violence becomes personal to its victims and those surrounding them. I know this because both of my children are victims of violent crimes. Into lives of peace and serenity have come the piercing weapons of destruction and pain from fellow human beings. And with the martyrs in Revelation we pray, “How long?” (Rev. 6:10).

But what do we see regarding the gospel of Jesus Christ when we go to the Scriptures? Do we not see God at work in the midst of the most ungodly? When we look at the crucified Jesus, do we not see a holy God at work in the midst of the most disgusting and unholy and violent scene of all? Interestingly, the cross has been the symbol of the Christian faith across the centuries, not some empty, hollowed-out rock. Although this symbol points us to a horrible scene that should evoke feelings of repulsiveness, we have buffed it and polished it. We have tried to clean the ugliness and maybe even the violence out of the cross. Could this be because we just cannot see God’s holiness in that which seems so unholy? Could it be that we cannot imagine God working in hallowing ways in the midst of such repugnant things?

In his articulation of the gospel message, the Apostle Paul typically pointed to the cross of Jesus Christ. In 1 Corinthians 1:22-24, Paul stated, “For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (NRSV). But why? Paul also stated, “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor. 1:27; NRSV). In all the horror, the death, the foolishness of it all, Paul saw God at work in saving ways. That divine activity transformed the unholy into the holy. That is why this is gospel — good news!

In the crucifixion scenes of Luke 23, we find glimpses of what is such good news at an awful time like that. When every last hope and dream of Jesus’ followers were crushed and destroyed as Jesus was hoisted into the air on a Roman cross (an execution reserved for crimes of treason and intended to expose the criminal’s foolishness and powerlessness against the mighty Romans), we catch a glimpse of what is truly gospel at a time like this. When Jesus gulped his last breath, we see something of the living gospel in his dying moments. Other Gospel writers focus on Jesus crying in despair, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt.27:46; Mark 15:34). Many interpret this to mean that, as Jesus bore the sin of all humanity, God turned his back on his Son. But Luke gives us a different picture. Here in his depiction of Jesus’ crucifixion, Luke helps us to see the presence and grace of God at work. We do not find God bursting onto the scene. But neither do we find God turning his back on his son. Rather, we find the presence of God in the midst of this

scene. In the place where we would least expect it, here we find the grace of God at work. In the bleakness and barbarism of those moments — in that event where nothing godly seems to be happening at all — we find glimpses of God at work in at least two ways.

Notice that, first of all, Jesus was crucified between two other men. Both men were apparently guilty and deserving of whatever punishment they received, and Luke presents Jesus in the middle of these criminals — these outcasts — these sinners. But what happened next? Even here we find the good news of grace and salvation, as one of these most unlikely persons in the most unlikely place responded in unlikely faith to Jesus. When everyone seemed to be against him — when religion and government and friends all left him to hang there and die in excruciating agony — the unexpected happened. In the midst of the horrible, the despicable, the anguish, the stench, we find in Luke's account that grace broke in and made holy that which was so unholy. Notice also that Jesus in this account did not cry out in despair and forsakenness. Instead he called out in confidence, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). Jesus' words do not suggest that God turned his back on Jesus. Instead they present an image of God who was with Jesus, facing him in love, accepting him in grace. The awfulness of crucifixion has not disappeared. The haunting sounds — of a hammer clanging against the iron spikes, of the bloodcurdling screams from the ripping of his flesh — continue to reverberate in our ears as we hear and see what Luke describes. But in the midst of the despair — in the midst of humanity at its worst — Luke shows us that *this* is where God meets humanity.

Narratives like Luke's Gospel call us from our everyday worlds into a world shaped by the story itself. When we "participate" in that narrative world, we see and hear and experience things that can transform how we see things in our everyday world. Given what we see of God and God's work in Luke 23, what might we see in our contemporary scenes of violence, oppression, abuse, etc.? Will we see the holy God making things holy even in these scenes of ours? Let us **hope** so!