

HOLY MONDAY

Prologue

As I write this and dwell on my story, I realize that there is little doubt the cross is the most recognized and powerful symbol in the history of mankind. It has been used to conquer, to brutalize, to define positions of power, to give comfort and hope to those whose troubles seem overwhelming, and as describe here, God's love for us. Behold the cross, on which hangs the salvation of the world

All Things Living

(The tree of life personified)

Before history.... before man..... before time....the Father, the Word, and the Spirit were always and forever everywhere. God, the Creator, wanted to share the heavens and the earth with one whom He would create in His own image. Eastward of Eden, where the rivers Pishon, Gihon, Tigrus, and Euphrates flowed, in the region of Mesopotamia, He created the garden where plants and animals of all kinds flourished. Standing taller than all the trees He created, were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Following the creation of this garden, He created man, giving him dominion over all the plants and animals. And He commanded man that he may partake of any tree in the garden save one...the tree of the knowledge of good and evil for if he did, man would die. And of this tree, man did partake, in spite of God's command.....and man was banished from the garden. The Lord God moved through the garden and knew what would come of it. He placed the cherubim with a flaming sword to guard the tree of life from man. The Word took it upon Himself to tend to this one tree, quite well knowing what was to come of it.

Of all the plants that He created, the most majestic were the trees, which towered over all other growing things. And the trees, being subjected to man, but not knowing what would come of them until the time of their harvest, dreamed of how they would serve. And one tree in particular, the tree of life, dreamed as others did, of serving man....this, long after man's banishment from the garden. And it knew that there must be something special in its future for it was cared for by the Son and did not multiply as the others multiplied. No, it was unto itself, one of a kind. Its wood was not like others, which caused it to dream.... special dreams....

HOLY TUESDAY

As the decades rolled into centuries the tree would dream; ‘Would I be fashioned into a throne for a king, with finely stained wood grain, attesting to the importance of the royalty who would rest upon me and make proclamations? Would I become elegant trim, gracing the king’s palace, where all would gaze upon my beautiful grains as they came to pay homage to the king and petition for his favor? Or would I become a pergola under which the royal family might take comfort from the scorching sun. Surely these things were the best that could come of me. For, to serve a king whose majesty was known to all and before him all bowed, must hold the most promise.

It was strange however that it had not yet been chosen, for its uniqueness was surely known to the carpenters who frequented this part of the world. It was from this region of Nippur, along the trade routes through Babylon and Rutba, to Damascus, and on to Jerusalem that all of the region’s most majestic forests stood. It was from here that all of the best were argued over and bartered for between the landowners and the traders who came great distances for these magnificent giants. And yet, this giant stood alone, overlooked, ignored, or, perhaps, unknown to the tree itself..... protected from the eye and axe of the woodchopper.....but to what end?

Finally...after so many years of waiting, on an unusually rainy night, two woodchoppers took their turns carefully chopping the tree. It did seem odd at first as the removal of this tree was taking place under cover of darkness, the rain masking the noise of the axe. After a while it became evident from their conversation that these were two thieves, taking something that was not theirs! Being subject to the whims of man, the tree could do nothing. It could only hope that its beautiful wood grain would be used for a noble cause. As the tree was loaded onto a cart it knew that its destiny was at hand. On the long journey to someplace called Jerusalem, the home of Pilate, the fifth Roman Prefect of the province of Judaea it seemed as though the millennial dreams of the tree were about to come true. Surely the Prefect harbored grandiose plans for such a fine specimen of wood. It was the most exciting time for the tree, proudly weighing its own value while considering its coming service to man.

Upon entering the city, the tree was placed in a large yard with several other trees and money changed hands. As it lay in the yard, it could not help but notice that in comparison to the other trees this tree stood out. Its fine exterior and strength easily set it apart from the others. The tree could not feel more proud of how straight and thick its main trunk had grown over the years. It had no way of knowing that its pride would soon be replaced by seemingly unforgivable shame.

HOLY WED.

At this time in Jerusalem, the city was engulfed in turmoil. For it seemed that a man who called himself the Christ, Son of the Father, was performing miracles among the poor and oppressed and speaking of things yet to come. He spoke of how the law would not save the people but only the grace of God. He spoke of dying and rebirth. His actions caught the attention of the Pharisees who represented the religious views at this time in Jerusalem's history. They were fearful of Christ as they could easily see His followers growing in numbers and usurping their power. The tree was oblivious to these happenings and waited for what could only be a glorious transformation into finery fit for a king!

It was only days later that the tree overheard that an order had come down from Pilate's chief carpenter. Pilate himself had ordered that a strong tree be selected for some as yet unknown purpose. Surly since it was the Prefect who handed down the order, the tree was finally going to receive its glorious transformation in service to man! The tree could hardly contain its excitement as several men, under the direction of the chief carpenter set about with their measuring ropes and winches, moving the tree from the yard into a wood shop. As the carpenters labored to transform the tree there was small talk of others in their trade. They spoke of Yosef, a simple carpenter, dead for many years, but whose works were nonetheless cherished by all who possessed them. He was known by almost all of these carpenters. It was Yosef's humble approach to his work and serene temperament that they envied. 'Didn't he have a son?' Why didn't the son follow in his father's footsteps?

MAUNDY THURSDAY: As the work progressed the tree could see how important it was that its trunk was strong and straight for from it were fashioned two large timbers. It dawned on the tree that these types of timbers were used for the entrances to large exclusive homes...but didn't there have to be three, two longer ones for the posts and one of shorter length for the lintel? This indeed puzzled the tree. When it's two pieces were placed among other similar timbers, it was easy to see how different this tree's timbers were from the others. For it was after the carpenter's care and skill that the true, close grain of the wood stood out, the beauty of which glistened in the morning sun. It was the proudest of moments for the tree.

It was a short time later that the two pieces of the tree were joined together. The shape that they took was unknown to the tree but the simple fact that it had been chosen, over all the other timbers, was enough. And the beautiful, tight grain enabled the two pieces to act as one strong form. Finally, the tree was being prepared to serve a king apparently in a manner which was quite different due to its new shape. How fitting thought the tree, after waiting for so many centuries.

A day or so later, the tree was taken to a different place.....a sad place. It seemed to be a place of pain and suffering. A place where men were chained, whipped, mocked, and suffered immense cruelty at the hands of their captors. Why was the tree placed here, among such misery? Still uncertain of what was to happen, the tree started to doubt what it thought to be its good fortune.

Sadly, the tree came to the realization that it was not going to grace a palace or be admired for its beautiful grain. A man, who had been beaten, whipped, and who wore a crown of thorns upon his head was forced to carry the tree, whose great weight had previously been borne by two or more carpenters. The tree was carried by this man through the streets of Jerusalem for the better part of the day. It's weight bearing down upon this seemingly broken man. The tree could only imagine the pain and suffering of this man as he struggled and was mocked by the crowds. What had he done to deserve such cruel treatment? Surely no man deserved to be tortured like this. Still the tree did not know what part in this terribly sad situation it would play. It only knew that given the current circumstances, it's place in service to man would not apparently serve a noble cause.

GOOD FRIDAY

Finally, as the shadows of the day grew long, the tree found itself at a place that the onlookers called Golgatha. The tree was lifted from the man who was made to suffer under its great weight and who had fallen several times during the day.

As the soldiers laid the tree flat, they threw down upon it the man who alone had borne its weight. At that moment, the tree recalled a time in the distant past, for it now realized who this man was. It was through this man's care that the tree had come to be like no other. The tree had come to know this man's love so many centuries ago..... in a garden, created by Him. The soldiers used iron spikes which they drove, unmercifully, through the hands and feet of this man into the tree. The tree no longer thought of what it hoped to become in service to man for it now remembered its Creator, who, in His infinite wisdom created this tree of life for quite another purpose. A purpose far more important than anyone could imagine. This tree of life would be instrumental in the Father's plan for the salvation of mankind. The pain that the tree suffered as a result of its tight grain holding the spikes fast paled in comparison to the suffering of the Son. But at the same time the pain experienced by the Son seemed to be transferred to the tree itself, for sap, like tears, flowed unhindered from the grain where the spikes had entered the wood.

When the soldiers were finished driving the iron spikes, they lifted the tree, now holding the Son, and slid it into a crevice which was then secured by stones to keep it upright. The tree could feel the pain caused by what was now being called a crucifixion. The tree tried to will itself to hold the Son and absorb his pain but the tree could only serve the Son. It had no power of its own.

It was during this time that the tree became aware of two other trees on either side of it which also held men, secured by ropes, not spikes. These men the tree had known earlier, for it was on a dark rainy night, just a short time before, that the tree came under the axe of these thieves. It now turned its attention back to the man it held and again it tried to relieve the pain and burden of this Son of man who loved it so many centuries before. But it was to no avail.

The tree stood helpless as time seemed to stop. The Son, held fast by the iron spikes, asked for water but was instead given sour wine. He was treated more cruelly than either of the other two. As darkness grew at this place of immeasurable sadness, a place which had to be the worst of places, the Son, was now speaking to someone who did not seem to be there. He asked ‘the Father’ to forgive those who had done this horrible thing to Him. And, a short time later, He died. The soldiers, wanting to be certain, pierced His side with a lance. Blood and water flowed from His side and mingled with the sap that had been flowing like tears.

HOLY SATURDAY

The tree was taken down and the man removed and placed in a crypt about a stone’s throw away from the place where He died. The tree, having served the purpose for which the carpenters had intended, was cast aside and later buried nearby so that true believers would not venerate it later. As it lay there, ignored by the day’s events, it felt completely at peace, yet it could not help but believe that there was something more, something yet to come.

Epilogue

Relics! Bones, clothing, personal belongings, all said to connect man to God in a more meaningful way, to somehow move man closer to the Creator. The limited intellect of man when trying to put God in our own box in order to understand Him, to define Him to use relics to connect to Him. There are countless accounts of those who possessed slivers of the cross. You may know of the comments of Erasmus recounted later by John Calvin: “There is no abbey so poor as not to have a specimen so that if all the pieces that could be found were collected together, they would make a big ship-load”

Indeed, there are countless stories of the true cross found, the true cross lost....and then found once again. Of the sick cured by touching the cross as well as the dead being raised up again. So, the tree, used as an instrument by God, was there to serve...not man but the Son in the salvation of man.

James W. Feret - *used for Morning Reflections - Holy Week 2022*