

A WILLING SACRIFICE

Shirley Kinney

April 8, 2007

Happy Easter to you all! This is a high holy day for Christians. It is a day of sacred meaning. I hope to examine some of that with you today as well as explore a few side alleys I wandered down on my own.

I hadn't planned on giving a talk on Easter. I was cruising happily along under the impression that I had nothing to be thinking about until next month's service that I had promised to prepare. I was reading whatever struck my fancy—enjoying myself. I read part of a book by J. M. Robertson called Pagan Christs, which talks about the many many ancient religions that celebrated a sacrificed, often crucified, Christ figure. The book started heading off into strange conclusions that I didn't have the energy to pursue, so I put the book down.

Instead, I picked up a book that Ann Kelsey and Pirkko had recommended—Barrabas by Lagerkvist. When Ann and Pirkko recommends a book, I try to make a point of reading it because they invariably know what they're talking about, and, so far at least, I'm always happy I've read their recommendations. Barrabas is a short book about, as I'm sure you've guessed, the biblical figure of Barrabas who was the criminal set free while Jesus was sent to be crucified. Excellent book! I add my recommendations to theirs.

The next book I read was Stephen King's The Stand. This is the uncut version. Apparently, in the original published version, King had been asked to cut his manuscript in half because his editors hadn't felt it was economically feasible to publish such a huge volume. Twenty years later, and millions of dollars richer, Stephen King had enough financial clout that he put back in all that he had cut earlier, so the characters are much more fully developed and interesting. I really enjoy Stephen King's novels. Sure, there's more than enough scary stuff and gore, but he's an excellent story teller and underneath the gore and blood are some pretty thought-provoking concepts.

In The Stand, King explores once again the extremes of religious evil and good. He has the evil guys crucifying the good guys. He has human sacrifice to save humanity. Very much an Easter story—in a gory kind of way.

To bring all this rambling together—I got an email from Bob Weekley asking if I'd do the Sunday talk today, Easter Sunday. How could I say no? All these books I'd been reading were shoving me into doing some Easter kind of thinking. Some mysterious fickle finger of fate had been pushing me to get in the right frame of mind.

So, if you will indulge my superstitious nature a little bit, let me walk you down the three paths my mind was taking when all this happened.

Easter is all about Hope. Hope that our lives are not in vain. Hope that there is something big out there guiding all of this stuff we're going through. Hope that there

will be a brighter tomorrow. And, today, Hope that what I'm about to say makes some sense.

Beginning with Robertson's Pagan Christs –

Robertson says that religion is based on magic. Mankind throughout the ages has needed to feel that if he does certain prescribed rituals, performs certain prescribed sacrifices, says certain prescribed words, then good things will happen to him. Man needs to feel that magic can happen in a world of ordinary prosaic life. Water can magically change to wine. A god can magically create a child with a mortal. Things which are dead can become alive again. Man knows these things are not supposed to happen. He cannot explain how they could happen. But, he believes that if he does the right stuff, then Magic will make them happen.

The Christian church, according to Richardson, has always been hostile to magic, while at the same time, they practice it regularly. He cites the Eucharist as a prime example, as well as the use of holy relics to perform miracles—you know, touch the left finger bone of a St. Peter and your leprosy will disappear. Magic.

The sacrifice of human beings was once wide-spread—in Greece and Asia as well as among the ancient Mexicans and Peruvians. The common factor throughout these sacrifices was the belief that some benefit would result from the sacrifice—either to the community or to an important individual. When the victim is thought to be divine—a god—then we are dealing with magic. At first, it was important to the ritual that the victim be a willing sacrifice and to be pure. And so, the first born son of the king was slain. Or, another variation was the children were taken from their parents very young and raised to be the sacrificial victim in future years. As this act became repellent to man's sensitivities, slaves were substituted, or captured enemies or criminals. As man became more civilized, this sacrificing of humans was changed into white doves or lambs. The Lamb of God. But, still the purpose of the sacrifice was to willingly give up a life for the good of the community. The gods would be appeased by the sacrifice and crops would flourish, disease would die out, enemies would be conquered.

The Jews sacrificed Jesus, son of God, according to the story, and the whole of mankind was saved. Magic happened.

Lest we start patting ourselves on the back at how advanced and civilized we have become, how far away from magic we have turned—think of all the times you have said to—whomever—“if you just let me win this game”, -- or, “please let me get a A on this test”—or, “keep me safe on this airplane”—then, “I'll say twelve Hail Mary's every day for a year” or, “I'll never yell at my mother again”, or, “I'll walk on my knees to the mailbox for a week.” We're hoping magic will happen for us.

Catholics give up something for Lent every year—chocolate or cigarettes, or whatever. It probably doesn't mean very much to them nowadays, just a symbol. But deep down inside, they are probably sure that by giving up what they want, even if it's only for a few

weeks, they will attain a higher degree of salvation or pity or at least it'll go on their permanent record for when they have to face Saint Peter at the gates.

It's still a matter of "I'll swap you something hard for me if you'll do this one thing." A sacrifice to make life better for you. It's Let's Make a Deal with God. Magic happens.

The story of Barrabas tells that a condemned criminal—a bad guy, not liked by the people, was to be crucified, along with three other men, one of whom was Jesus, a religious teacher and something of a rabble rouser. It was the Jewish custom at the time to, once a year, spare the life of one condemned prisoner. This was their civilized way of appeasing the gods. The common people were given the opportunity to select one man from those condemned to die and that man would live. The crowd this time chose Barrabas. Why, is up for debate, but they chose Barrabas, a criminal, over Jesus, a kind rabbi. Jesus was crucified. Barrabas walked away free. End of the story as far as Barrabas was concerned in the biblical accounts.

But, in this book, Barrabas watches as Jesus is crucified. He watches at the tomb where Jesus is buried. He spends his life among Jesus' devoted followers. At one point, he is sent to the copper mines to work as a chained slave. He is chained to another man for many years, night and day. This other man is a Christian and wears around his neck a symbol carved on the back of his chains, showing he is a follower of Jesus. Barrabas asks the slave to carve the symbol into his neck chains as well. Years later, when asked if he is a Christian, Barrabas says no. "Then why do you wear the symbol of Jesus around your neck?" And Barrabas answers, "Because I don't believe, but I wish that I did." I wish that I believed in your magic. I think that is a very powerful statement that perhaps reflects the thinking of many of the born-again Christians in America today.

Finally, on to Stephen King. I know—it seems sort of sacrilegious to bring the king of horror into this story of hope and sacrifice and religion. Maybe it is. But, Stephen King is a firm believer in the struggle of good over evil (and good ALWAYS wins in the long run in his books—as opposed to real life, where the outcome is always iffy.) King believes in magic and he believes in telling a really good story.

In The Stand, the role of evil is played by Randall Flagg, a tall lean and ugly Walkin Dude. He is pure evil. The role of good is played by Mamma Abigail, a 108 year old skinny poor black devoutly Christian woman who has outlived all of her husbands and her children and is just waiting to be taken by the hand of God Almighty.

The U.S. Army has, by some awful mistake, released a superflu germ that quickly wipes out 99% of the world's population. The only ones spared are a very few people who have strong vivid dreams. And those dreams take the form of Randall Flagg, Mr. Evil, or of Mamma Abigail. The country quickly separates into the good guys against the bad guys. The good guys are drawn by their dreams to Boulder, Colorado (don't ask me why) and the bad guys are drawn by their dreams to—where else?—Las Vegas, Nevada. The bad Walkin Dude regularly punishes anyone who disobeys him by crucifying him on a cross for everyone to see. Now, you would think this sacrificing and crucifying should appease

gods, as I've already talked about. But, apparently, these victims are not being sacrificed for the good, they are being sacrificed for the evil. And so, the gods are very definitely NOT being appeased. At the end, two of the good guys come over to Las Vegas to put an end to the Walkin Dude. They are willingly taken captive and then prepared to be tortured as only Stephen King can do, in front of all the inhabitants of Las Vegas. This willing sacrifice does the trick and all are saved, through an act of magic, except the evil people who are all wiped out.

So, where does all this take us?

The story of Jesus' death on a cross, his willing sacrifice for the sake of the souls of humankind, the need we all seem to have had for a very long long time for the belief in magic. The story of Barrabas, the man who walked free instead of the sacrificial Jesus. Barrabas, who wanted with all his heart to believe in this magic, but could not. And, Stephen King, who reminds us once again, that if we but sacrifice a willing victim, mankind can be saved from evil.

We have traveled thousands and thousands of years since man has been civilized enough to invent gods and rituals and religion. But, are we walking in circles? Are we still believing in magic and sacrifices and mythical gods? I think maybe we are.

I think that if 99% of humankind were wiped out tomorrow, giving us the opportunity to re-invent our lives, to create a world we've all said we wanted, we'd get ourselves busy and sacrifice to our gods so we would be protected from another catastrophe. Someone would certainly see the face of Jesus in an oilslick on a highway underpass. The few remaining Israelis would still fight the few remaining Palestinians over whose fault this all was. And life would go on as usual.

I suppose on a day of hope, such as Easter, this kind of message is a particularly depressing one, isn't it? It is.

So, let me try to put a bit of a good face on it. The world hasn't ended today. And, no doubt, it won't for a little bit. So, maybe there's time. Time to change the way we do things.

Robertson's book also says that the way people believe or the way they carry out their basic beliefs won't be changed by legislation or by edict from the king. People only change their religious habits if a "better" way of doing things is shown to them by their religious leaders. People didn't stop sacrificing humans even though told to by their government leaders. But, when their religious leaders told them that their sacrifices would be more pleasing to god if they used innocent white doves instead of children, suddenly everyone wanted doves.

Israelis and Palestinians aren't going to start loving each other just because governments sign treaties. Fanatical Christian zealots aren't going to accept the fact that our Constitution tells them church and state must be separate. Fanatical Muslim zealots

aren't going to stop sacrificing their sons with bombs strapped to their bodies just because NATO tells them not to. They have to believe that by changing their behavior, their gods will be more pleased.

Which is not to say that signing peace treaties and passing laws setting down equality for all people are not good things to do. But it won't solve the problems long term. Hatred and violence will continue until our gods change.

Clearly, I don't have a solution. But, it's Easter. I do have Hope. Hope that humankind has enough basic intelligence not to destroy itself. Hope that if an answer presents itself, we are intelligent enough to grab onto it. Hope that life will continue to spring eternal from the depths of our earth.