

Behold Your Mother - The Meaning of Life in Seven Words

The Gospel According to St. John 19:25-27

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I often feel that when we step into the presence of the cross, we are stepping into the Eternal Now. In some sense, the death of Christ on the cross is not just an event in history. It is always happening. The same can be said of Easter, of course, and Christmas. In Christ eternity touches time. In Christ we touch eternity.

And what an eternal moment we have stepped into.

Rome is always ruthlessly plotting its survival. Zealots are always plotting subversion. Ordinary folks are always just trying to get on with life.

Judas is always betraying. And he is eternally hanging somewhere from a lonely tree.

Peter is always denying. And he is eternally weeping somewhere because of his weakness.

Followers are always cowering. Jesus is eternally dying.

A few women, a mother, and a young man are always standing by in horror and in grief.

On one hand, bonds closer than blood are broken by fear, betrayal, denial, and self-preservation. On the other hand, bonds are redefined anew, blood relations no longer are the only definitions of kinship.

What a moment, eternally present. And we are there now.

The best way, I think, to take full measure of Jesus' words to his mother and to his disciple, John, is to contrast them with his encounter with Judas just a few hours earlier.

Someone once told me that the only way to comprehend the vicious fights that sometimes erupt in churches is to recognize that in churches people are always motivated by altruism. As strange as that might sound, I think it is basically true. In my experience, I've never known anyone in any disagreement in a congregation who did not truly, deeply, genuinely believe that they were not only right, but that their actions were for the best.

I think this is probably true of Judas, but perhaps his rightness, and his altruism, mixed with other motives. Perhaps his feelings of love and devotion were mixed with other emotions, like fear, anxiety, self-preservation. Otherwise, I don't think remorse would have driven him to take his own life. Maybe he started out by being disappointed in Jesus, but what places his head in the noose was disappointment with himself.

Ricarda Huch would have been an extraordinary woman in any era, but living as she did in the nightmare years of Nazi Germany, there are not superlatives sufficient to praise her. An aristocrat by birth, she was also noble. And brilliant, so brilliant. At a time when women were barred from universities in Germany, she simply went to Zurich, Switzerland, to study. And she became the greatest scholar of her age on romanticism, writing a novel about the Thirty

Years War that one critic described in these words: she possessed an “uncommon gift for talking about the powerless as if they had the importance of power.”

When Hitler came to power, and after he had removed an entire generation of incomparable Jewish scholars from Germany’s universities, he desperately wanted to garner some remnants of academic respectability in these institutions. He set out to place distinguished Aryan academics in the highest places. He had already procured the composer Max von Schelling to serve as president of the Prussian Academy of the Arts. So he asked Ricarda to take a leading role in the academic world.

In short, she told Hitler where he could put his offer.

She might have been exiled or exterminated, but she survived. And she survived to write a remarkable tribute to the young men who plotted to take Hitler’s life in the July 20, 1944 assassination attempt, a group which included Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Clive James, the cultural critic, wrote about Ricarda, saying that she forced all her contemporaries in Germany who equivocated, who compromised, collaborated, or who just flowed with the stream, to face up to her, and up to themselves. James said, she forces all of us to do so, to face her. And then he says something that takes us back to the cross.

Ricarda’s example, writes James, demands that we “remember why Judas found it so hard to look into the face of Christ — not because of the divine serenity that was there, but because of the self-seeking calculation that was not.”*

How ironic, how tragic, that it was Judas’ self-interest, his desire for self-preservation, that led him in the end to take his own life.

But, in this Eternal Now of the crucifixion event into which we have stepped, there is an alternative. These women, this mother, this young man, stand at the foot of the cross. And this Jesus says to his mother Mary: “Woman, behold your son”; and to his one disciple who did not run away, “Behold your mother.”

What holds us when everything around us seems to crumble and fall?

Here stands this tiny congregation at the foot of the cross. They are in the eye of the storm. They lie in the belly of the beast. Think of the most threatening metaphor you can and apply it freely here to them. The situation could hardly be more dangerous.

Does stoic dedication to duty hold us steady?

Does a sense of honor, of human nobility, stand against the onslaught of threats?

Will a vow hold us true?

Will love?

When C. S. Lewis was a young soldier in the First World War, he and his best friend, Arthur, made a pact. If either of them was killed in the war, the survivor would take care of his parent. Lewis' father was a widower, Arthur's mother a widow. Arthur was killed in battle. And when he returned home, and secured a teaching position at Oxford, Lewis took in Arthur's mother and she lived the rest of her life with him and his brother.

Biographers either have been inspired or puzzled by this bit of history.

A young Oxford don, at the beginning of his career, burdens himself with the mother of his friend. Surely, promises made in extreme situations don't have to be taken literally. Perhaps, one biographer reasoned, there were sexual shenanigans going on in the Lewis household. That's the only motivation sufficient to account for his behavior, reasoned the historian. Or, perhaps, Lewis didn't see it as heroic at all to simply do for his friend what he would have done for his brother, because he saw his friend as his brother.

Seneca, the Roman Stoic philosopher, once said that we are given friends so that we have someone to die for. Jesus said much the same thing when he said that there is no greater love than to lay down your life for your friends. But, on the cross, Jesus goes further.

Jesus looked into the face of his mother and in one gesture swept away sentimentality, and replaced it with love. "Woman (not Mother), Woman, behold your son." And to a disciple who stood with him in that moment, "Behold your mother." And looking into a face where not even a shadow of self-preservation passed, a young disciple, John, found his destiny.

This is the Eternal Now in which we also stand, beside John, at the cross. In our mind's eye, look into the face of the crucified. And find there, that which holds us true.

Amen.

*The story of Ricarda Huch is drawn entirely from Clive James' essay on her in his book "Cultural Amnesia: Necessary Memories from History and the Arts" (New York/London, 2007).