

Spolek přátel ETF Association of Friends of the PTF

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Notes on the book *Jesus' Story – a challenge for us* *Ježíšův příběh – výzva pro nás*
(for the meeting of members of the Association of Graduates from the Protestant Theological Faculty of the Charles' University, November 2006)

Introduction:

1.

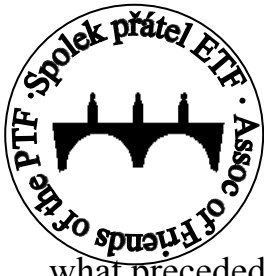
On many pages in my book I talk about one theme: about a thought that is deeply rooted in the ecumenical movement, it is a common tie between us and Catholics: the idea that what is decisive for our belief is the passion of Jesus, his judgement and crucifixion, his sacrifice on the cross. And the idea that this sacrifice led to a reconciliation between God and mankind, because through this sacrifice our sins were removed forever, the sins that, as the descendents of Adam and Eve, took us away from God. According to these concepts the cross forms the centre of the gospel. It is the core of our belief.

The story of the passion by right belongs to the fundamentals of the NT (New Testament) message. Jesus remains faithful to the divine right to the end, he does not resist his bitter destiny and dies at human hands as one accursed. From the Romans' angle as an accursed political rebel, from the Jewish council's angle as an accursed blasphemer and enemy of God. That is how we are given to understand it from the NT.

A problem arises as soon as we see from these sources that Jesus' death on the cross was pre-composed into God's salvation plan. The notion that God the Father had an active hand in the death of his beloved son and most devoted witness is unsettling. The sections of the passion are of *Christological* import, but they are also relevant for comprehending *theology*. In other words: they depict the figure of Jesus of Nazareth, but they also give us a certain concept of God, shifting Him to the side of those that wanted Jesus' death and who also arranged it.

In my book I have opened up a discussion on this matter with a number of theologians from both home and abroad. Of the Czech theologians we have devoted dozens of pages to L. Hromádka, J. B. Souček, P. Pokorný and J. Heller. Of the important European theologians I deal with about twenty names among them J. Moltmann, D. Bonhoeffer, D. Sölle, J.T.A. Robinson and others

The basic thesis that I try and expound in the third part of the book, about 100 pages, is: for our belief Jesus' worldly story is essential. More precisely: what went on from his appearance until after his arrest. The passion sections, including the crucifixion, corroborate and affirm Jesus' path, which is a testament to God, to his coming kingdom. However, they are not the basis of our faith, an isolated date, which our faith rests on. They belong to the gospel, make up its parts, which preceded it, but we can only interpret and understand them adequately if we look at



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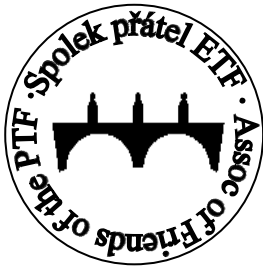
what preceded them and what came after them. Isn't it so that in the light of Golgotha's cross we understand and interpret Jesus' previous activities and the following event of the crucifixion.

2.

Our believe has two foci: one is the worldly life of Jesus with the associated crucifixion, the other focus is the belief in the resurrection of the one that devotedly foretold God's reign and was reinstated by God. Through this interpretation of the gospel story we are freed from the necessity of explaining God's participation in the crucifixion. Put professionally, we do not have to enter into a so-called theodicy i.e. an attempt to vindicate God for what happened on Golgotha. God and Jesus belong on one side and those that judged, arrested, imprisoned, interrogated, condemned and executed Jesus belong on the other. Nevertheless during a superficial reading of the Gospel and the epistles we are pressured towards the notion that God the Father is, in a certain manner, a kind of co-instigator in the crucifixion. However, it is not so. It is necessary to bear in mind that in the death on the cross there is no enactment of a sacrifice which was demanded by God the Father for the sins of all mankind. The notion of salvation through this single sacrifice on the cross is thus put in a different and, in my mind, correct light. The death on the cross is of course a proof of the fact that Jesus remained devout to divine affairs even at the cost of losing his life, face to face with the death that was prepared for him by God's enemies. Salvation, the deliverance stemming from Jesus' life; that is the basis of the new, true existence before God and for people.

It is necessary to remember that throughout Jesus' life the cross is present in some manner. In his early childhood Jesus' life is substantively threatened by Herod's order to kill all newborn boys. Spurned, persecuted, misunderstood – even by the disciples – a life of poverty, betrayal – these dark shadows of the cross accompany Jesus for the entire period of his public doings. The drama on Golgotha was the climax of this arduous life. A real *via dolorosa*. However our salvation is not to be found in these events alone.

The real deliverance and example that we take as our own in our faith are hidden in Jesus' *life*. The apostle Paul, who in his epistles places great emphasis on the redemptive character of Jesus' *death*, also – albeit rarely – indeed realises this side. He writes in Romans 5.10 *For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.* This is the reconciling love with which Jesus approached sinners throughout his life. He didn't turn against them even during his tribulations on Golgotha, when he died by man's hand on the cross. And thus reconciled he saves us all throughout his life, to which the last word with the cross legitimately belongs.



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3.

I am coming to the concluding remarks: The primordial church interpreted the gospel about the life and death and crucifixion of Jesus Christ to a world that was full of religious ideas. This was true for the late Jewish community in which Jesus grew up, for the apostles such as Paul and for the Greek and Roman societies. In the then religious world sacrifice to the gods, sacrifice as a substitution for the guilt, sin or general insufficiencies of man when face to face with the divine world, played an important if not crucial role. The significant role of cults and ritual practices corresponded to this.

In this matter Jesus steps out of line. If we follow his life, the fantastic richness of his relationships as elicited from the Gospels in the numerous meetings, discussions and his acts, it can be seen that his basic message is one of the good news (Gospel) of the compassion, of profuse justice. In the face of God no one is forgotten, no one is lost. Merciful God, who has included everyone in the work of his kingdom, does not want sacrifices. Not just that. He expects that we will fulfil that which is connected to the word about the creation of mankind: that we were made in His image. Jesus understood this divine hope. In fact so much so that in the Sermon on the Mount he expresses the notion, which sounds unbelievable to protestant ears: That we should be as He is. More specifically: We were created just a little bit less than God (Psalm 8) it is a clear message of a provocative word: Be as **perfect** as your Heavenly Father (Mt 5,48). Temples, cults and ritual practices take second or third place for Jesus. They are things that have been given to us as an ornament of life if we can be profusely just.

On this new understanding of divine matters Jesus is a guide. From his mouth we hear the clear word: *Ye have heard that it was said to them of old time, ... but I tell you (Mt 5:21)*. This should always ring out in our ears as a joyous incentive. In the middle of our day to day lives Jesus takes us to an assertion of divine affairs. He brings the joyous tidings that in hope, thankfulness, service and responsibility for others, ourselves and the communal life of the society therein lie the sense and aim of our worldly existence, similarly as it was for him in his understanding of divine affairs. It does not distract our attention from daily chores. It arms us with spiritual energy so that we can carry them out. It challenges us to being ever more just.

In obedience to this calling we attest to our faith, that we have understood his Gospel, which places us in society and among the others. This will not return us, modern Christians, to the past. It will turn our attention to what is ahead of us, what we, in the community of living witnesses, are allowed to expect in hope and for what we have to set off on the testimonial path for.

Prague, November 2006