

# Easter vs. irony

At the beginning of Lent, I was sent a moving account of the recent funeral procession of a young American soldier, which took place near his hometown in the South. The most striking section read as follows:

“... the most incredible thing happened following the service on the way to the cemetery. We went to our cars and drove to the cemetery escorted by at least 10 police cars with lights flashing ... Everyone on the road who was not in the procession pulled over, got out of their cars, and stood silently and respectfully, some with their hands over their hearts.

“When we turned off the highway, suddenly there were teenage boys along both sides of the street ... all holding large American flags on long flag poles, and again with their hands on their hearts. We thought at first it was Boy Scouts or 4H Club or something, but it continued – for two and a half miles. Hundreds of young people, standing silently on the side of the road with flags. At one point we passed an elementary school and all the children were outside, shoulder to shoulder – kindergarteners, handicapped, teachers, staff, everyone. Some held signs of love and support ... No one spoke, not even the very young children ... The love and pride from this community [which] had lost one of their own was the most amazing thing I’ve ever been privileged to witness.”

I forwarded the message and the accompanying photos to a friend, who responded in a most thoughtful way:

“There you see a culture untainted by irony. That is exactly the environment in which I was born and lived for my first 18 years; imagine my surprise when I reached Princeton and discovered higher criticism, debonair nihilism, and the enervating paralysis of irony.”

All of which, I suggest, is worth a Passiontide meditation.

The Jesus of the Gospels is a figure devoid of irony. Yes, he tells what scholars call “parables of inversion,” in which the worldly pecking order is turned upside down and inside out; but there is no irony in his teaching – and certainly no cynicism about

the rich and the powerful getting theirs at last. In his Passion, Jesus confronts a supreme ironist, Pilate, who imagines the question, "What is truth?" to be both clever and a rhetorical show-stopper. The sign Pilate has affixed to the cross - "The King of the Jews" - reeks of irony, as so the taunts of those who wanted a messiah who better fit their understanding of power.

Perhaps the trouble so many highly educated people have in accepting the gift of faith today is that their spiritual faculties have been dulled by the irony in which modern and post-modern high culture abounds. Very little today is what it once was thought to be: what we once regarded as good, we are now taught was base; what we once honored as noble, we are now informed was merely self-serving; what we once thought to be self-sacrifice, we are now told was just self-delusion. Innocence is ignorance; only the ironic sensibility befits a well-educated modern. Or so we are told.

The Danish philosopher Kierkegaard had a rather different view: "Irony," he wrote, "is an abnormal growth; like the abnormally enlarged liver of the Strasbourg goose, it ends by killing the individual." Kills, that is spiritually: for irony is no part of that child-like openness with which, Jesus tells us, the Gospel's invitation to faith must be received. If western culture is dying spiritually, perhaps the pathogen responsible is irony.

On the cross, Jesus is crushed by the weight of irony and cynicism. Easter, then, is God's answer to the ironic: the New Life first manifest in the Risen Lord is God's response to the ironic, God's definitive proclamation that the ironist will not have the last word. In the Church, the Body of Christ which is the Risen Lord's real presence extended in time and space, we encounter the truth and love that transcend the ironic and let us see things as they really are.

Irony no longer reigns. He is Risen!

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