

John 13:31-35
May 18, 2025

The Human Being

In the Gospel of John, Pontius Pilate has only a few lines. He is certainly not a leading character, but a part of the supporting cast. A couple of them are very interesting and significant. In the interrogation of Jesus in the scene at the trial as described in the 19th chapter, after Jesus has proclaimed, "I have come to bear witness to the truth," he famously asks, "*what is truth?*" It is only one of life's great questions.

A little later he presents Jesus to the crowd after having been roughed up quite a bit. The soldiers have mocked Jesus as a king by placing a crown of thorns on his head and a purple robe on his body; and by giving him a scepter and saying, "Hail to the King of the Jews." When the soldiers had finished their part of the charade, Pilate presented Jesus to the people and their leaders with these words,

"Behold, *the man.*"

Frederick Buechner relates a story about a vacation visit to the Redwood Forest, and in it describes his silence and the silence of the other tourists when for the first time they beheld the giant trees. It was as if they had never seen a tree before, that they were in the presence of the real thing, and everything else mere shadow.

Pilate was being sarcastic, of course, and ironic, but the sarcasm and irony fail in the face of the truth,

when after they had flogged him and mocked him and played dress up with their purple robe and fake crown, he presented Jesus as the quintessential person; only the joke was lost on them, it was as if for the first time in their lives, "they beheld an actual human being." It is an irony of incidental and unintended truth.

It is all the way back in the 13th chapter that Jesus is at the table the night before the trial and crucifixion, and he tells the followers that he is about, "to be glorified." It is a strange way to think of what those present at the time saw as his humiliation.

Even among believers all these centuries later, it is still more common when thinking about human glory to think of some kind of victory celebration; such as a downtown parade after a World Series or a Super Bowl triumph with crowds of cheering people and all that confetti falling down from the highest roof tops or from wherever it is that confetti comes in situations like that; or perhaps an Olympic medal ceremony with the victor's national anthem blaring, or the presentation of a Nobel prize.

Before we journey to the empty tomb on Sunday morning so we can behold the glory of the Risen Lord, we first visit the cross and see the mocked and beaten and crucified Jesus, for in *that* moment he was at his most truly human, as well as his most truly divine.

There are several approaches one can take to define what it means to be human. Most of the academic life of the world is focused on those several methods.

We can learn about the past the way an historian might, or examine everyday tasks like a cultural anthropologist or break down the component parts like a chemist or a biologist or study the mind as a psychiatrist; there is geology and philosophy and economics, but sooner or later one will have to put away all those tools and try to picture whole what a person is.

In addition to their being attempts at self-understanding, what they all have in common is that they try to understand humanity by looking at people, and what the people leave behind, which, though it makes a kind of sense, it turns out to be unconvincing.

In his accidental and clumsy way, Pilate has presented *Jesus* as the focus of attention; and Jesus as we all truly are; small, weak, powerless before the mob, mortal . . . And at the last meal Jesus calls it his moment of glorification. Before anyone says anything about it, we should be silent before it like Buechner's silent tourists at the sight of the majestic trees.

Perhaps the truest visions of humanity do not come from the academic disciplines, but from photography, and are the pictures of coal miners at the end of the day coming up out of the mines with their soot-darkened faces, or one of those depression era pictures of a woman with her hair all a mess and dry chapped hands from years of hard work that make her look fifty years older than she is, or a bloodied soldier on the field of battle.

We, all of us, can clean up and dress the prettier part, but we know the truth deep down about our earthy mortality, and of the darkness of the soul within, confused and threatened by exhaustion and doubt and selfishness and angry about it all. It is the way Jesus looked after Pilate is finished with him. Pilate says, "behold, the man." Jesus calls it his, "glory."

In the words of the theologian Karl Barth, when discussing the habit of Jesus of referring to himself as, "Son of Man," and the insistence of the gospels that he is the, "Son of God," speaks of his . . . "glorification no less than his humiliation. One and the same in both aspects . . . God given up for man to human misery, and man taken up by God into divine glory, this is the Son of Man who as such and for this reason is also the Son of God."

This is the human being. We are to understand ourselves in terms of the humanity of Jesus. The condemned, beaten, mocked, and executed Jesus is the glory of God revealed to the world.

In order to understand it, we first must behold it, and then search out and listen to the reason why. We know that in the Gospel of John, the reason is given in the third chapter in the infamous conversation with Nicodemus where Jesus tells him that it is because God *loves* the world.

And then sitting at the table with these confused and dazed men who had no idea what they were about to

experience, and hear Jesus tell them what it looks like to be truly human,

“A new commandment I give you, 'Love one another. As I have love you, so you must love one another. Everyone will know that you are *my* disciples if you love one another.”

Yet the suffering Jesus is not the only expression of God’s glory. The other expression happened at Easter; it is the raised and exalted Jesus on the other side of the crucified and humiliated Jesus.

The cross represents who *we* are in our humanity; it is what we do to one another, it is what we did to God. The cross is also what God has done for us in Christ Jesus.

This should always stop us in our tracks. We should be humble and silent before it. And pray that its power would come to have sway over our lives. It is in humbly that we can respond with faith.

The acceptance of God’s action on our behalf. And faith more and more leads to obedience, which turns into compassion and goodness, which turns into love for all people, and leads to peace and joy and hope . . . it leads to *eternal life*.

It is a part of the consensus of the age that suffering and sacrificial love is destructive of the soul, that if taken seriously in will lead to loss, harm, victimization, that one will be diminished by it. Among other things,

the humanity of Jesus is set against this “spirit of the age.”

Even the risen Lord bears the marks of his suffering. The example of Christ, compels us to consider the possibility that suffering love leads to meaning, liberation, and health, to the highest apprehension of life that can be known, and to an inner peace beyond understanding, to a stunned silence in the presence of the divine.

Needless to say even the best of us don’t spend enough time dead in our tracks as we know we should, but do not be dismayed . . . rather, look again, see again what being a person under God is meant to be, and accept again the gift that leads to life.

[Back](#)

[Home](#)