



## Reflections on Torture, Part III

It may seem all but out of line, writing about torture at Christmas. Not really. St. Matthew's Christmas story comes to a bloody conclusion: the massacre of the children of Bethlehem. The Christ child got caught up in the politics of the times to say nothing of the religious confusion.

Beyond this story, the Bible has other ways of addressing the issue of torture. Specifically, Hebrews 13:3 commands, "continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them... and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering" (TNIV). The word translated *mistreated* can also be rendered *tortured* and it occurs in Hebrews 11 where, beginning at verse 37, one encounters a repertoire of tortures enough to make one's skin crawl.

Christmas impinges in this way: the author says the recipients of Hebrews should be "as if you yourselves were suffering." That's identification with the tortured and mistreated at the deepest level possible. Such identification took place when the Word took on flesh in Jesus when he entered human history and history did its dirty work on him.

It started early, with Herod. Did Mary and Joseph tell Jesus the story of the massacre? Is that where he learned to identify with those who had no voice, no one to stand with them? The author of Hebrews said that Jesus learned obedience through what he suffered (5:7-9). Wounded or not, Jesus never withdrew his person from friend or foe. As Jacques Maritain wrote, "wounds which cause a human soul to be compassionate are evangelical wounds."

If it is thought such identification is limited to the Christian community, it is well to look at Hebrews 13:2. Hospitality is to be given to strangers.

Such texts require nothing short of the Christmas *Spirit* to carry out the Christ child's later commands: "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:44-45, TNIV). One of his followers, a converted torturer, Paul, said, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse" and "Do not repay anyone evil for evil" (Romans 12:14 and 17, TNIV). Finally, this hard-to-swallow command from Proverbs: "If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head" (25:21-22; Romans 12:20, TNIV).

Let us join the incarnated Christ in his identification with the tortured and torturers on the cross, using verse from Wisława Szymborska's poem "Torture" to not forget the Christmas connection to those exploited in body and mind by torturers.

Nothing has changed.  
The body is painful,  
it must eat, breathe air, and sleep,  
it has thin skin, with blood right  
beneath,  
it has a goodly supply of teeth and nails,  
its bones are brittle, its joints extensible.  
In torture, all this is taken into account.

Nothing has changed.  
Except maybe manners, ceremonies, dances.  
Yet the gesture of arms shielding the head  
has remained the same.  
The body writhes, struggles, and tries to  
break away.  
Bowled over, it falls, pulls in its knees,  
bruises, swells, drools, and bleeds.

"Christmas has its cradle, Easter has its cross." Both hold Jesus. The inn has no room for torture. ■

---

C. John Weborg is professor emeritus of theology at North Park Theological Seminary.