

**“Unless you Repent:” Cliff Forster Changed his Mind  
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I’ve just finished Encounters, Nancy Keeney Forster’s amazing book recounting her life with Cliff and their children, serving American diplomacy and goodwill all over the world. If you’ve gotten into it at all you’ll realize that Cliff’s father set for him a kind of mission when Cliff as a young man only recently released from a Japanese internment camp in the Philippines was reunited with his father while serving Naval intelligence in Washington DC.

It was there he learned that the infamous General Homma who had commanded the Japanese occupation of the Philippines, and thus his prison camp, and who had become widely known in this country as the “Beast” or the “Butcher of Bataan,” had admitted his “moral responsibility” for what had been done under his command at the extraordinary military tribunal established by General MacArthur whose army had been defeated by this same man. Now MacArthur had “returned” and with a vengeance. Cliff brought this news to his father and was a bit taken aback by the reaction. Instead of the joyous celebration he expected, Cliff’s father looked thoughtfully and asked what made him think that Homma was guilty.

Whether it was his father’s more mature understanding of the dynamics of the American public’s fever for revenge for Pearl Harbor and the Bataan Death March, and his recognition of how that could tip the scales of justice in the trial, or whether because in his own role as the Red Cross officer in Manila during the occupation, he had glimpsed something of the character and humanitarian restraint of this now scapegoated general, we can only speculate. The result was that Cliff’s own life was set on a course to change his own mind, to discover the truth, the truth about human conflict and national interest, and particularly the truth about Masaharu Homma, whose biography Cliff would undertake to write years later in retirement.

From the mob listening to Jesus in today’s Gospel comes a question something like, “how about those Galileans who were killed at worship by the Romans?” Caught up in a fever of vengeance toward the so-called “half-breed” Galileans, but especially against the occupying Romans, the reaction they’re looking for from Jesus is something like, “More proof Galileans are sinners and deserve it;” or maybe, “Yeah, those poor people are holy martyrs at the hands of the blasphemous Romans.” In other words, they’re focused on an interpretation of these deaths that depends on a God of wrath. The divine justice of it, we might say. They’re asking, “What side should we be on so we can know God is with us and against our enemies?” This same crowd at the Triumphal Entry we celebrate on Palm Sunday welcomes Jesus into Jerusalem as the avenging hero.

But this looks to Jesus just like the Tempter’s way to power so familiar from the desert. It puts him at the head of the crowd leading the heavenly host against the Romans and all other idolators and infidels. It is a human construct that uses violence and death, in Chris Hedges words, “as a Force That Gives Us Meaning;” it is not about God. There is no violence in God, no revenge, no death at all. But we attribute these things to God and to concepts like justice, and morality. Jesus’s response is shocking. He confronts the mob mentality directly by deflating their estimation of the grandeur of death. The issue turns on the meaning of “repent,” “metanoia.”

“No, I tell you;” you’ve got it all wrong, “Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.” And then he goes on to make the point: “Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.” What he is not saying is this—he is not saying, “Unless you straighten up, God will get you too!” The resurrection of Jesus makes that clear. Jesus died the death of a sinner, ostensibly condemned by God, a criminal and a blasphemer. But the resurrection shows that he is alive beyond death, that all of us will continue to be embraced alive in God’s love, even after death. Death is no big deal.

Now please don’t misunderstand me; naturally, we grieve terribly for those whom we “love but see no longer;” our lives are shaped by our losses. And we are appropriately shocked and overwhelmed by the devastation to human life of the earthquake disasters in Haiti and Chile. But these, like countless cancers and automobile deaths are random accidents, however tragic they may be to the lives of those left. Only a fiend would attribute them to the judgment or punishment of God. But the fact that death is not the end and that all those who have died are alive in God, even as we are alive in God, can give us the comfort of a different kind of meaning. Indeed, the resurrection of Jesus can give our life a meaning that reaches beyond death. This is the “Good News” we preach. This is the repentance we call for. Repent! Change your mind about death! Stop being socially conditioned by the fear of death. If we don’t, says Jesus, we’ll die as meaninglessly as we will have lived.

You remember the story of the Grand Inquisitor from Dostoyevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan, the rebel anarchist son, tells it to Alyosha, his brother the pious monk. In Madrid at the height of the Inquisition, Jesus returns and begins healing people on the steps of the cathedral in the sight of the great Auto De Fe, a huge mock trial of heretics, the monument to death and violence attributed to God, for the sake of power and control over society. The cardinal inquisitor happens to be walking by, sees these healings and has Jesus arrested. “Why have you come back?” he interrogates him, “You have already done your part. We are now in charge and we have given the people what they want. You wanted them to have freedom, but they can’t handle that. We give them bread.” Jesus is silent. Then the Inquisitor finally tells him, “Tomorrow, you will be burnt at the stake. What do you have to say?” Jesus silent replies by kissing the inquisitor on the lips and walking by him outside. This is the choice we have. Will we continue to manipulating and controlling whole populations with the fear of death and violence, or will we grasp for ourselves—and give to others—freedom from fear of death, love beyond death.

General Homma’s son by his first wife, the woman who after bearing two children is said to have left him for a life of prostitution, this son is now a Christian and a pacifist, somehow fulfilling the yearnings of his father, living in the family home in Sado Island in Japan. In the midst of the fog of post-war revenge, Cliff Forster’s own father had challenged him: “What makes you think he’s guilty? You should make a distinction between his acceptance of moral responsibility and actual guilt for what happened.” And then went on, “Give this a lot of thought before you make any final decisions of your own.”

Unlike Cliff General Homma had weeks in 1945 to prepare for his death a death that would come by firing squad. At the end of his trial he wrote a letter thanking his very

inexperienced defense team for their hard work and dedication on his behalf. He did not mince words: “you all did your best . . . to give me a fair trial, which I know is denied to me from the outset. I am well aware what the verdict would be, and I have had no illusion on this point from the beginning.” And then he said something quite extraordinary: “There is no greater love than to die for your friends.”

Cliff’s death, in contrast, was sudden and accidental. He fell down his stairs and never regained consciousness. But it is as if through the eyes of his enemy General Homma, Cliff came to see clearly that death has no dominion over us. It is just a step from one stage of life to another. At his execution Homma, according to his daughter’s account pieced together from eyewitnesses, “chatted amiably with his executioners and delivered a 30-minute sermon on the evils of war, which so moved the men that ‘when my father told them that he was now ready to die with dignity, the soldiers couldn’t bring themselves to pull the triggers. . . He called them three times, “Please shoot! I am ready.” But nobody moved, until finally one man shot him in the heart and he was instantly killed.’”

So unless we change our minds about sin and death and its relation to God, that is unless we stop thinking that death is God’s punishment for sin, stop seeing ourselves as carrying out God’s justice in bringing violence and death to others, unless we stop calming our own fears at the expense of others, then we will die meaningless deaths ourselves. Without the insight that Cliff gained from the study of the life and death of General Homma, without the metanoia accomplished through the lifelong pursuit of an answer to his father’s question: “What makes you think he’s guilty?” Cliff’s life could never have as effectively shined with the compassion and generosity of spirit that through him brought the best of America to the world.