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The triumph

Luke 23, 47

"So when the centurion saw what had happened, he glorified God, saying, "Certainly this was a righteous Man!"

As we gather for this memorial service about Ferenc David, this question naturally arises: Why do we commemorate his day of death? There are several instant and plausible answers: because we don't know his exact date of birth, or because when our loved ones pass away we no longer celebrate their birthdays, but we remember the day they died.

My contention is that there is a lot more to this. The circumstance of Ferenc David's death is significant when we consider the influences of his life, his teachings.

Let us begin by drawing an analogy to the life and death of Jesus. The life story of Jesus is about the search for the truth. He spoke about the truth, and through the very example of his life he wanted to demonstrate truth to his disciples, and to all who cared to listen to him. He didn't teach about ordinary truths, but about the divine truth that affects our lives every day, the divine truth that is eternal and transcendent. Truths such as God's presence around us, the nature of God as a loving parent to us, that God is always reachable for a conversation, and that God is forgiving and patient. Jesus taught that human beings have inherent worth, they have an important role in the shaping of the world, and have an inherent ability to be kind.

The teachings of Jesus caused monumental changes in the people around him. Some left behind their homes, their possessions to follow Jesus (such as Peter). Some opened their houses to him, and supported him financially (such as Maria and Martha). Some, even in the higher ranks of society, risked their reputation and their social position when they contacted him to ask his advice, and to listen to his words. (such as Nicodemus). Some, having heard of Jesus, went to extreme lengths just to get a glimpse of him (such as Zaccheus).

However, those examples proved to be the exceptions. When it came to the teachings of Jesus, the majority of the people were spectators without the intent to follow him. That majority saw in Jesus perhaps an aberration, a miscreant who crafted his message

cleverly, someone who resisted the hated occupiers, someone who called the scribes hypocrites.

The majority of the people remained observers of Jesus, as they were unwilling to walk with him, unwilling to apply his teachings in their lives, or to accept him into their circles of friends. That majority saw Jesus as one of those run of the mill, crazed, head in the clouds type of oddity.

The observers and bystanders began to take notice of Jesus only when he was crucified. Who was this man, whose execution was wanted as badly by the Roman Empire as by the local Jewish authorities? Who is this man who is not looking for excuses, who is not taking advantage of opportunities to compromise to save his life? The observers and the bystanders began to sense that something extraordinary is about to happen. However, most of them thought that Jesus allowed his torture, his humiliation and his crucifixion, because he intended to perform a miracle, free himself from the cross, exact a punishing revenge on his captors, and he will claim his glorious triumph. The disciples, friends and supporters of Jesus, based on their familiarity with the prophecies of the Old Testament, just as well were likely to expect such a triumphant outcome.

However, what actually happened was shockingly different from those expectations. There was no miracle on the cross. and that must have stunned the observers and the bystanders. The sufferings of Jesus ended with his death. He offered up his life to God, and he passed. A Roman centurion recognized it first when he said "Surely, this was a righteous man". Then others realized that Jesus was true, he believed in what he was teaching, and that man, Jesus, had the courage to suffer for the truth, to be humiliated and to be put to death for the truth. And those realizations marked the beginning of the genuine miracle.

Yes, my brothers and sisters, I said miracle. Would we, in the present day, consider credible the sacrifices of Jesus, his self-restraint, his statements of the faith, his teachings about God, if he knew all along that he will be resurrected, if he knew all along the he will avenge his sufferings and strike down his doubters and nay-sayers in order to achieve total triumph over his adversaries? Jesus had different ideas about triumph. He passed on his faith, his understanding of God, to his disciples and supporters, and he entrusted onto them to complete what he began, and that they, in turn, will achieve that triumph. That was true then, and we can see it working today as well; the goal of Jesus wasn't worldly glory, but to further the victory of that divine truth he knew and experienced. For that truth he self-consciously and honorably accepted his own downfall and defeat.

Now, my brothers and sisters, it's not too difficult to see the similarities between the life, death and righteousness of Jesus and that of Ferenc David. Ferenc David was a kind of person who aspired to seek the divine truth without compromise. While seeking that divine truth he wasn't deterred either by decisions of synods, by the presence of a wide

variety of opportunities for compromise, or by the half-truths that caressed the vanity of the well to do. With a single-minded, unshakable determination he was seeking the truth from the Bible. Many of his peers decided to join him. They followed him, they listened, they questioned, and they supported him. Life was full of energy around him, the heart of his intellect was beating rapidly, and in the arteries of his intellect his God-seeking soul moving intensely. That energy and that heartbeat made him very much valued and appreciated, securing for him a very high reputation. That reputation afforded him to stand on the side of the king, and to deliver a speech which was the prophetic Ferenc David's Mount Horeb moment. There he was called to fulfill his divine mission by saying that God is one, and that the conscience of all people must remain free.

However, his followers and supporters turned out to be the exception. It is true for Ferenc David's life too, that most people, the multitude, around him were proven to be spectators. The multitude admired his oratory skills, respected his uncompromising character, and his assuredness that swept his opponents away in debates. His opponents were irritated by the uniqueness, and the clarity of his teachings, and those opponents, while they couldn't refute his teachings, they undermined him, and eventually sealed his fate.

Ferenc David was given more years and more worldly recognition than Jesus. But then, Ferenc David's inevitable, bitter destiny has arrived brought about by historical changes in Transylvania. That destiny was manifested in fading accolades, and a worldly defeat, and failure. The spectators around him were gawking, and waiting around. Even his supporters and followers were expecting him to heed the message of changing times, to listen to his instinct of self-preservation, to cease teaching, and to allow the new historic context to mold his faith and his thoughts.

The miracle was that such a moment never arrived. The miracle was that once he recognized and experienced the divine truth, the importance of his personal condition and his instinct of self-preservation were diminished. The miracle was that Ferenc David continued writing about the truth, continued teaching and preaching the truth with a boldness, energy and fire fueled by his faith. The miracle was that he threw caution to the wind, and refused to craft a compromise. The miracle was that several hundreds of years of synod decisions didn't slow him in his search for the truth. The miracle was that he wasn't deterred by new legislations and decrees, even when he knew that ignoring those legal matters will put him on the path to imprisonment and death. The same centurion standing next to Ferenc David's prison cell would have recognized him too: "Certainly, this was a righteous man". With the passage of time, it was that sacrifice that made all unitarians recognize that Ferenc David was a righteous man. His teachings, his searching, his struggles, his plans and his acts glow in the light of that highest divine truth. He didn't just explained, but verified it with his entire life: for a mortal human being that crucified prophet is deserving of our highest attention, our utmost consideration, in this entire world.

Although Ferenc David was given a longer life and more worldly recognition than Jesus, Ferenc David experienced for a much longer time the symptoms of his abandonment. Once he saw that his supporters and followers are distancing themselves from him, he probably construed that his followers may not continue his mission of seeking the truth. However, his confidence in God never wavered, his trust was never diminished in the God who enabled him to recognize, and to serve the truth. He was never concerned about his personal triumph, as seeking the truth was a higher order imperative.

By the will of God a triumph is yet achievable, as we can continue Ferenc David's mission by maintaining his legacy through praising and consecrating his achievements. We must remain loyal to this inheritance; we must continue to seek the divine truth, and giving that a priority above any worldly glory or triumph. We must continue to place our trust into God who gifted both Ferenc David and us with a combination of faith and intellect to seek the divine truth. We must take advantage every opportunity in our lives to proclaim with our words and our actions that God is one, and the human conscience must be free.

The life of Ferenc David wasn't a triumphant march. When we reminisce of him we ought to accept the responsibility to become part of the coming triumph of his mission.

Amen.