

I remember the day he came to town. I had never seen him in the church before. He had an other-worldly – almost eerie, one step away from sinister look about him. He was tall and gaunt – but it almost seemed that he didn't have a shadow – but that is impossible, isn't it? Only the dead or the living dead do not have shadows. And he certainly wasn't – well, you'll have to decide for yourself.

It was Good Friday. We had just finished reading the account of the crucifixion and I was getting ready to deliver the homily. I looked out over the congregation and there he was – 3 pews from the front and sitting all by himself. No one else sat in front of him or beside him.

He was dressed all in black. His skin was drawn tight over his face making his cheek bones protrude. I could not look away from his eyes. They were hooded, sunken and black as coal. They seemed to burn right into my soul as he looked at me.

I don't remember much about what followed. I preached the homily, I know that, but I just could not seem to escape his eyes.

Well, the service ended and the folks went home. Everyone, that is, except this mysterious stranger. He remained seated and motionless, never taking his eyes from the huge crucifix that hung above the altar.

Later that day I was in my office, finishing up my homily for Easter. It was quiet. Suddenly there was a knocking – a pounding really – on my door. Annoyed at the intrusion, concerned about the urgency, and frightened by the viciousness I slowly opened the door. It was him. I was taken aback by the sickly color of his skin. He just stood there – his eyes boring deep.

I stepped back and he hurried by me; his thin hand momentarily brushing mine as he sped past. It was cold....lifeless. I recoiled as a chill caused the hair on the nape of my neck to stand on end.

I motioned to a chair and he sat – rigid and erect. "What can I do for you?" I asked.

"Nothing – you can do nothing for me." His voice rumbled deeply. "No one has ever been able to do anything for me. That is not important. I have come to you because of what I can do for you."

Now I started to worry. I have read about moments like this and my guess was that I was about to get an offer I could not refuse. All I would have to do was forfeit my soul. I was about to demand what he wanted when he interrupted me with a question – a question that has haunted me ever since.

"DO YOU BELIEVE IT?" he asked.

"Believe what?"

"What you said in there...." He motioned in the direction of the church.

"Well, I don't know – I suppose so. What do you mean? What did I say?"

“Just as I thought,” he sneered. “You are just like so many others. You say things so glibly you are not even sure you believe what you say yourself.”

That pricked a sensitive spot. “Now wait just a minute. First of all I don’t know who you are; I don’t know what you want; and I am not sure of what you are talking about. If this is important then please get to the point. If not – I have a lot of work to do.”

“I hit a nerve, didn’t I? You want me to be specific. Ok, I will. You told your people that Jesus died in order to save us. As a result of this horrible and unjust death, God brings us into right relationship and thereby calls us to not rest until justice, peace, and love are available for everyone. Do you believe that?”

“Well, yes – yes I do.” I would have been a fool to say I didn’t the way his eyes burned and challenged my very being. Of course, I did believe it but I was not sure where we were going with this.

“You will never forget this day,” he said, “Or the things we talked about. Your life will be filled with challenges to promote justice. You will meet people who need the basics of life; who need to be loved; who need peace. You will not be able to ignore them because your heart will burn within you and remember the day that I came to you.”

His black, sunken, hooded eyes seemed to glow with an inner fire – a fire that burned with passion within him. It was strange. On the outside he looked like death itself but deep within fiercely burned the flame of life. “Just who are you?” I asked.

“I am not known by my name. You would not recognize it if I told you. No one knows my name. I am known by my profession – by what I did. I am known as ‘the Hammer Man.’”

I didn’t understand any of this. It was all going over my head. I felt as though I was losing touch with reality.

“You look puzzled,” he continued. “You shouldn’t be. You talked about me today during worship.” His eyes narrowed..... “Think – I am ‘the Hammer Man.’”

It was almost as if I was hit with a jolt of electricity. “You mean.....no, it can’t be....can it?”

“Yes it can and it is. I am the one who drove the nails that pinned Christ to the cross. I am the one, who, with the blows of my hammer, joined together the centuries.”

My head was swimming. I thought for a moment that I was going to faint.

“I’m the one they always called when there was to be an execution. I had this gift. I knew how to drive the nails so that the weight of the body would not tear the arms and feet away from the wood. I didn’t really care. They were all convicted criminals. Life would have been better without them. I saw my job as a way to help purify the world in which we lived. Sometimes I was merciful and would deliberately puncture the area where the victim would bleed to death quickly. But mostly I missed that spot so that the condemned would die a slow and dreadful death.”

My head slowly cleared. “But that’s impossible! Jesus was crucified 2000 years ago. You should be.....”

“Dead?” an eyebrow shot up. “If I could die I would welcome it – I would embrace it with more tenderness than a lover. But I cannot die. I am doomed to wander restlessly through the ages and witness the

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intolerance and injustice, and inhumanity of all civilizations. Oh, these eyes of mine burn with what I have seen – mothers and children slaughtered by marauding hordes; babies ripped from their mothers wombs in abortion, others dying from malnutrition because the breasts from which they drank were dry; millions of people being gassed and burned in furnaces; elderly people mugged, young women raped, the innocents murdered, foreigners treated with disdain and sent back to their home countries to face certain death. And I will continue to roam through time until the kingdom of Christ finally comes in all its glory. And then I shall die.”

“No,” I said, “And then you shall finally live.”

His body snapped erect. He looked at me with such an intensity that I felt like a helpless mouse mesmerized by the snake about to devour it. Then slowly – so very slowly his thin pale lips curled in a smile; a smile that disarmed me with its tenderness and warmth. “Yes,” he said, “you are right....and then I shall finally live.”

He left me as abruptly as he arrived and I sat at my desk, caught between Good Friday and Easter and the words of the Hammer Man....”DO YOU BELIEVE IT?”

I’ve seen him again a couple of times. Once when a homeless woman approached me and asked if I had any money to spare for her to buy some food at McDonald’s, I caught a glimpse of him smiling as I pressed a \$20 bill into her hands. Another time I saw him looking into the casket of a small child who died from a beating from her abusive father. The tears that fell from his eyes onto the small spray of roses held by the child seemed to make them come alive. There were other times, and it was always the same. It was almost as if he was watching me – waiting; waiting to see how I would answer. Do I really believe it?

I suppose I will see him some more before I must close my own eyes in what he longs for. He was right, you know. I never did forget that day – and many are the times when my heart burns within me. (Adapted from James Henderschedt, THE HAMMER MAN, p. 19-23) DO YOU BELIEVE IT? DO YOU REALLY BELIEVE IT?