

The Power of Suffering Love: James Nayler and Robert Rich

by George Amoss Jr.

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(Note: The spelling is "Naylor" in my primary source, William Sewell's history of the Quakers. [See footnote 2.] Bowing to what appears to be majority opinion, however, I have adopted the spelling "Nayler.")

The New Testament reports that Jesus once entered Jerusalem seated upon an ass, with people laying their cloaks before him and chanting "Hosanna!" I don't think we'll ever know whether this story records an actual event or is simply an expression of the faith of some of Jesus' followers.(1) We do know, however, that a similar scene did take place in England many centuries later, when the Quaker James Nayler, one of the most influential and beloved of the first group of Quaker ministers, entered the town of Bristol on horseback as chanting people spread their scarves upon the ground. It may be that, as many historians have asserted, Nayler's act was the result of delusion and megalomania. I wonder, however, if Nayler might have been engaging in a bit of "street theater" to demonstrate the fundamental Quaker experience that the same Spirit which was in Jesus and his disciples is available to us today - that, in other words, "sacred history" is not so much the story of a golden age in the past but what we do here and now: "the Kingdom of God is within and among you." I like to think that he was, but I recognize that, as with the story about Jesus, questions about the reasons for Nayler's act will always linger.

The English authorities, however, did not pause to ask questions. Nayler and his friends were immediately arrested. Nayler was charged with blasphemy, a serious offense in those days.

After much debate, the Parliament sentenced Nayler to severe punishments. Beyond further imprisonment, these included being whipped through the streets and pilloried, receiving three hundred and eleven lashes, having his tongue bored through with a hot poker, and being stigmatized - that is, branded - on the forehead with the letter "B" ("blasphemer"). As Nayler was being led away after hearing this sentence pronounced, he was heard to pray, "Lord, lay this not to their charge."

I suspect that there was a political agenda involved in the Parliament's decision; many people wondered at the time why this apparently deluded Quaker was worth so much time and trouble. Many were shocked, too, at the severity of the sentence, and its being decided upon before petitions submitted on Nayler's behalf were permitted to be read. Some leading Friends seem to have feared that Nayler had given the government a powerful weapon against the troublesome Quaker movement, and they were careful to dissociate themselves from him. Even George Fox rejected Nayler; it is reported that when Fox visited Nayler in prison, apparently in order to "labor with" him, he refused Nayler's proffered kiss and seems to have told Nayler to kiss his foot. It is clear from such stories as well as from his later writings that Nayler felt abandoned in his suffering. There were, however, a few courageous Friends who stood by Nayler. The story of Nayler's most steadfast supporter, Robert Rich, has always moved and inspired me.

Rich, a businessman with much to lose, did not hesitate to act on Nayler's behalf. He boldly wrote to the Parliament in defense of Nayler, arguing that Nayler's act had not been blasphemous. He offered to meet with the legislators and prove Nayler's innocence by scripture; it is not recorded that any member of the Parliament accepted Rich's invitation. After the brutal public scourging, which Nayler underwent with Christian meekness and forgiveness and which took him close to death, others joined Rich in pleading with the government for clemency, but the sentence was not to be mitigated. Nayler was given only a week to recover somewhat from the scourging. On the day set for the completion of

the punishment, Rich appeared at the door of the Parliament, where he stayed all morning, speaking to the members as they passed, exhorting them to Christian mercy. At length, after crying out a warning to the legislators that they should keep their hands clean of blood, Rich went to stand with the suffering Nayler. I quote now from William Sewell, to whose early history I am indebted for much of this account:

"Then [Rich] went towards the Exchange, and got on the pillory, [and] held Nayler by the hand while he was burned on the forehead, and bored through the tongue; and was not a little affected with Nayler's suffering, for he licked his wounds, thereby as it seems to allay the pain; and he led him by the hand from off the pillory."(2)

I cannot read those words without tears.

It may be that Nayler's "triumphal entry" into Bristol did not convey the message of the presence of Christ's Spirit in our hearts; however, the experience of his meek, forgiving manner under horrible torture, and of Rich's courageous love, seems to have awakened many of the onlookers to that presence. It was the custom then for those assembled before the pillory to jeer the accused and pelt him with thrown objects. Although the crowd gathered before Nayler may have numbered in the thousands, the people were largely silent, even removing their hats during the worst of the torture. I think they must have understood at last that, despite the "language" in which he had tried to express himself, Nayler was indeed - as was Rich - possessed of the Spirit of Christ. After all, to speak, to make claims, even to act, can be all too easy, but to continue to love through rejection and persecution requires a real grounding in the Spirit of him who said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Whatever Nayler's motivation for it, the entry into Bristol was but an ersatz prelude to the true and lasting revelation of Christ in the suffering love of James Nayler and Robert Rich.

NOTES:

1. The scene casts Jesus in the role of the king in Zechariah 9:9,10: "Rejoice, rejoice, daughter of Zion; shout aloud, daughter of Jerusalem; for see, your king is coming to you, his cause won, his victory gained, humble and mounted on an ass, on a foal, the young of a she-ass. He shall banish chariots from Ephraim and war-horses from Jerusalem; the warrior's bow shall be banished. He shall speak peaceably to every nation, and his rule shall extend from sea to sea, from the river to the ends of the earth."
2. William Sewell, *The History of the Rise, Increase and Progress of the Christian People Called Quakers*, first published in the early 1700's. My quotation is taken from the 1844 printing (Baker & Crane), p. 184.

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This is the famous deathbed testimony of James Nayler (or Naylor), who died in 1660 at the age of 44. Nayler had, in 1656, been found guilty of blasphemy and suffered cruel tortures, including, along with other severe punishments, receiving brutal scourgings, having his tongue bored through with a hot iron, and having the letter "B" branded on his forehead. I believe that his sufferings were made worse by his rejection by many Friends, including George Fox. For a fuller account of Nayler's passion, see my "The Power of Suffering Love: James Nayler and Robert Rich." --George Amoss

There is a spirit which I feel, that delights to do no evil, nor to avenge any wrong, but delights to endure all things in hope to enjoy its own in the end. Its hope is to outlive all wrath and contention, and to weary out all exaltation and cruelty, or whatever is of a nature contrary to itself. It sees to the end of all temptations. As it bears no evil in itself, so it conceives none in thought to any other: if it be betrayed, it bears it; for its ground and spring are the mercies and forgiveness of God. Its crown is meekness, its life is everlasting love unfeigned, and takes its kingdom with entreaty, and not with contention, and keeps it by lowliness of mind. In God alone it can rejoice, though none else regard it, or can own its life. It is conceived in sorrow, and brought forth without any to pity it; nor doth it murmur at grief, and oppression. It never rejoiceth but through sufferings; for with the world's joy it is murdered. I found it alone, being forsaken. I have fellowship therein with them who lived in dens, and desolate places of the earth, who through death obtained this resurrection, and eternal holy life.

Source: William Sewell, *The History of the Rise, Increase and Progress of the Christian People Called Quakers* (New York, 1844), pp. 202, 203.

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