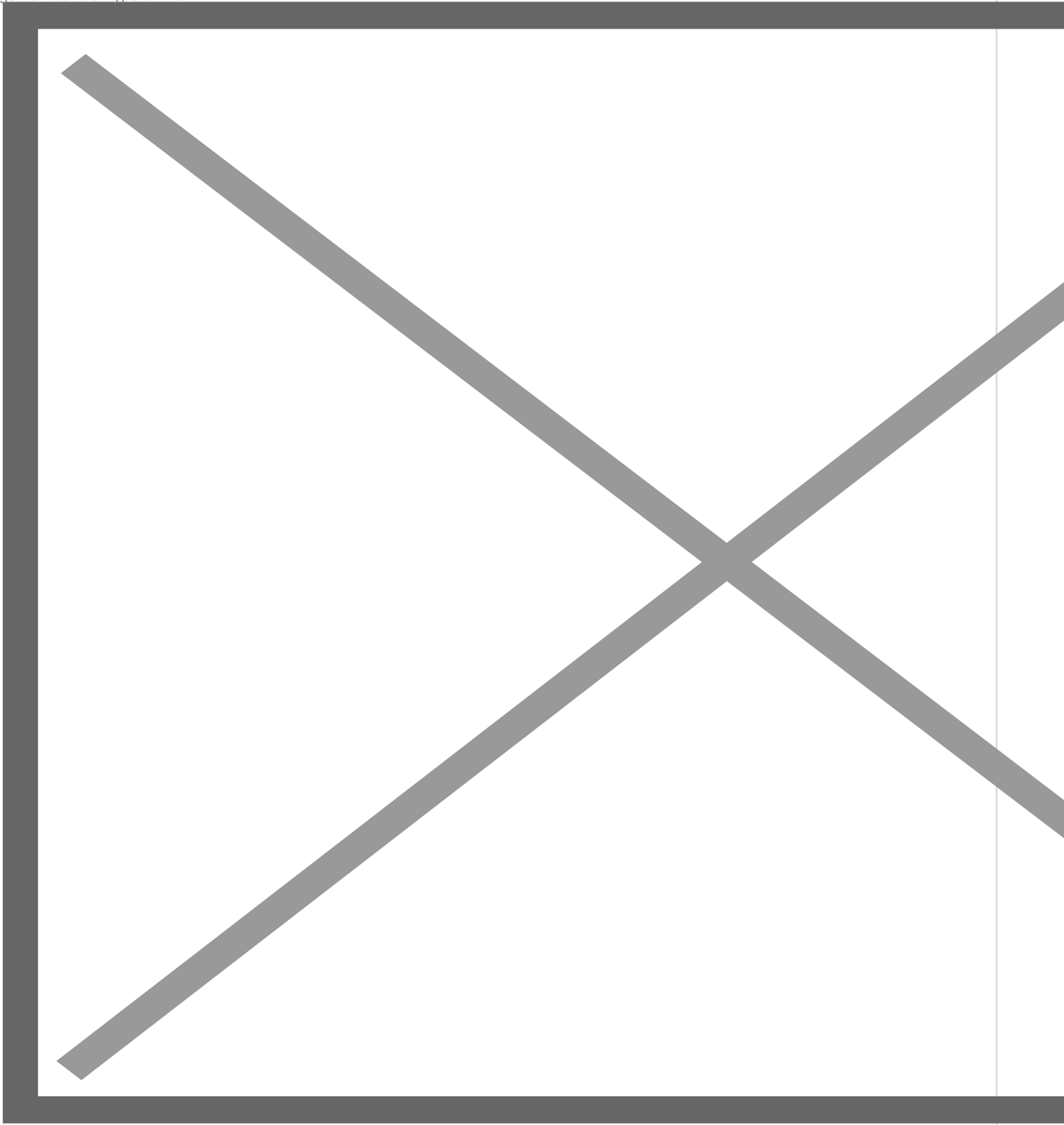


Chris Hedges: The Crucifixion of Julian Assange

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The Crucifixion of Julian Assange – by Mr. Fish

By Chris Hedges / Original to ScheerPost

This is a sermon I gave on Sunday Aug. 20 in Oslo, Norway at Kulturkirken Jakob (St. James Church of Culture). Actor and film director Liv Ullmann read the scripture passages.

Hebrew Bible Reading:

Jeremiah 37 11- 21

And it came to pass, that when the army of the Chaldeans was broken up from Jerusalem for fear of Pharaoh's army,

Then Jeremiah went forth out of Jerusalem to go into the land of Benjamin, to separate himself thence in the midst of the people.

And when he was in the gate of Benjamin, a captain of the ward was there, whose name was Irijah, the son of Shelemiah, the son of Hananiah; and he took Jeremiah the prophet, saying, Thou fallest away to the Chaldeans.

Then said Jeremiah, It is false; I fall not away to the Chaldeans. But he hearkened not to him: so Irijah took Jeremiah, and brought him to the princes.

Wherefore the princes were wroth with Jeremiah, and smote him, and put him in prison in the house of Jonathan the scribe: for they had made that the prison.

When Jeremiah was entered into the dungeon, and into the cabins, and Jeremiah had remained there many days;

Then Zedekiah the king sent, and took him out: and the king asked him secretly in his house, and said, Is there any word from the Lord? And Jeremiah said, There is: for, said he, thou shalt be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon.

Moreover Jeremiah said unto king Zedekiah, What have I offended against thee, or against thy servants, or against this people, that ye have put me in prison?

Where are now your prophets which prophesied unto you, saying, The king of Babylon shall not come against you, nor against this land?

Therefore hear now, I pray thee, O my lord the king: let my supplication, I pray thee, be accepted before thee; that thou cause me not to return to the house of Jonathan the scribe, lest I die there.

Then Zedekiah the king commanded that they should commit Jeremiah into the court of the prison, and that they should give him daily a piece of bread out of the bakers' street, until all the bread in the city were spent. Thus Jeremiah remained in the court of the prison.

New Testament Readings:

Matthew 4:1-17

Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred. And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone.

Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.

Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me.

Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him.

I dedicate this sermon to my mentor at Harvard Divinity School, Bishop Krister Stendhal.

Prophets are notoriously difficult people. They are not saints. They are people of agony, as Rabbi Abraham Heschel writes, whose “life and soul are at stake.” The prophet is moved by human anguish. Prophets are not soothsayers. They do not divine the future. Injustice, for the prophet, “assumes almost cosmic proportions.” A prophet, consumed by an unnatural fury, gives witness to “the divine pathos.” “God,” Heschel writes, “is raging in the prophet’s words.” He or she stands unflinchingly with the crucified of the earth, even to the point of their own destruction. “While the world is at ease and asleep,” Heschel writes, “the prophet feels the blast from heaven.” The prophet says “No” to his or her society, “condemning its habits and assumptions, its complacency, waywardness, and syncretism.” And the prophet “is often compelled to proclaim the very opposite of what his [or her] heart desires.”

Prophets believe in justice even when the world around them says there will be no justice. It is not that they transcend reality. It is that they are compelled to strike out against it, refusing to be silent no matter how hard life becomes. They are gripped by what Reinhold Niebuhr calls “a sublime madness in the soul,” for “nothing but such madness will do battle with malignant power” and “spiritual wickedness in high places.” This madness is dangerous, but vital because without it “truth is obscured.” Liberalism, Niebuhr goes on, “lacks the spirit of enthusiasm, not to say fanaticism, which is so necessary to move the world out of its beaten tracks. It is too intellectual and too little emotional to be an efficient force in history.”

But as the priest Amaziah says of the prophet Amos, “The land is not able to bear all his words.”

The Biblical prophets — Elijah, Amos, Jeremiah, Isaiah — believed that anything worth living for was worth dying for. Their enemy was not only suffering, calumny, poverty, injustice, but a life devoid of meaning. “You have to be prepared to die before you can begin to live,” the civil rights icon Fred Shuttlesworth said. Prophets cannot be intimidated. They cannot be bought. They are single-mindedly obsessed. James Baldwin, himself a prophet, understands. He writes:

“Ultimately, the artist and the revolutionary function as they function, and pay whatever dues they must pay behind it because they are both possessed by a vision, and they do not so much follow this vision as find themselves driven by it. Otherwise, they could never endure, much less embrace, the lives they are compelled to lead.”

The powerful and the rich make war on the prophet. They slander and insult the prophet. They question the prophet’s sanity and motives. They make it hard for the prophet to survive removing the prophet’s meager source of income. They punish and marginalize those who stand with the prophet. They silence the prophet’s voice, through censorship, imprisonment and often murder. The list of martyred prophets is long. Socrates. Joan of Arc. Isaac Babel. Federico García Lorca. Miklós Radnóti. Irène Némirovsky. Malcolm X. Martin Luther King Jr. Victor Jara. Ken Saro-Wiwa.

The truth grips the prophet so that he or she is bound so strongly to it that nothing but death can separate them from it. In that truth they find God.

“One can never wrestle enough with God if one does so out of a pure regard for truth,” Simone Weil writes. “Christ likes for us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go toward the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms.”

Who crucified Jesus? Organized religion. Organized politics. Organized business.

The executioners have not changed. They simply changed the story, created a counterfeit gospel, as the poet Langston Hughes writes:

Listen, Christ,

You did alright in your day, I reckon –

But that day’s gone now.

They ghosted you up a swell story, too,

Called it Bible –

But it’s dead now.

The popes and the preachers’ve

Made too much money from it.

They’ve sold you to many

Kings, generals, robbers, and killers –

Even to the Tzar and Cossacks,

Even to Rockefeller’s Church,

Even to THE SATURDAY EVENING POST.

You ain’t no good no more.

They’ve pawned you

Till you’ve done wore out.

The Carthaginian general Hannibal, who came close to defeating the Roman Republic in the Second Punic War, committed suicide in 181 B.C. in exile as Roman soldiers closed in on his residence in Bithynia, now modern-day Turkey. It had been more than 30 years since he led his army across the Alps and annihilated Roman legions. Rome was only able to save itself from defeat by replicating Hannibal’s military tactics.

It did not matter that there had been over 20 Roman consuls since Hannibal’s invasion. It did not matter that Hannibal had been hunted for decades and forced to perpetually flee, always just beyond the reach of Roman authorities. He had humiliated Rome. He had punctured its myth of omnipotence. And he would pay. With his life. Years after Hannibal was gone, the Romans were still not satisfied. They finished their work of apocalyptic vengeance in 146 B.C. by razing Carthage to the ground and selling its remaining population into slavery. Cato the Censor summed up the sentiments of Empire: Carthago delenda est — Carthage must be destroyed. Nothing about Empire, from then until now, has changed.

Imperial powers do not forgive those who make public the sordid and immoral inner workings of Empire. Empires are fragile constructions. Their power is as much one of perception as of military strength. The virtues they claim to uphold and defend, usually in the name of their superior civilization, are a mask for pillage, corruption, lies, the exploitation of cheap labor, indiscriminate mass violence against innocents and state terror.

The current American Empire, damaged and humiliated by troves of internal documents published by WikiLeaks, will, for this reason, persecute Julian for the rest of his life. It does not matter who is president or which political party is in power. Imperialists speak with one despotic voice.

Julian, for this reason, is undergoing a slow-motion execution. Seven years trapped in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London. Four years in Belmarsh Prison. He ripped back the veil on the dark machinations of the U.S. Empire, the wholesale slaughter of civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan, the lies, the corruption, the brutal suppression of those who attempt to speak the truth. The Empire intends to make him pay. He is to be an example to anyone who might think of doing what he did.

Julian had other options. His genius and his skill as a computer programmer and cryptographer would have seen him highly compensated by security agencies, private contractors or Silicon Valley. He could have made a very comfortable living if he served the Empire. His soul, as Christopher Marlow shows us in Doctor Faustus, would have atrophied and died, like the souls of all who prostitute themselves to power, but the material rewards would have been significant. He would have been a success, at least a success as measured by the powerful and the wealthy.

Satan tempts Jesus by offering him power, "all the kingdoms of the world," accompanied by glory and authority.

"If you, then, will worship me," Satan says, "it will all be yours."

This temptation is the fatal disease of those who serve power and with it the hubris and avarice that hastens, as the prophet Amos says, "the reign of violence."

And yet these malevolent forces are not the most dangerous.

"When I was a rabbi of the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime...the most important lesson I learned under those tragic circumstances was that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problems," Rabbi Joachim Prinz says. "The most urgent and most disgraceful, the most shameful, the most tragic problem, is silence."

Julian's crucifixion is a public spectacle. It is not hidden. And yet we watch passively. We do not flood the streets with our protests. We do not condemn the executioners, including Donald Trump and Joe Biden. We give his crucifixion our silent consent. W. H. Auden in *Musee des Beaux Arts* writes:

About suffering they were never wrong,
The old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position: how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse

Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

Sacrifice, self-sacrifice, is the cost of discipleship. But few are willing to pay that price. We prefer to look away from suffering, a boy falling out of the sky. And it is our indifference, and with our indifference, our complicity, that condemns all prophets.

"But what of the price of peace?" the radical priest Father Daniel Berrigan, who spent two years in a federal prison for burning draft records during the Vietnam War, asks in his book "No Bars to Manhood":

I think of the good, decent, peace-loving people I have known by the thousands, and I wonder. How many of them are so afflicted with the wasting disease of normalcy that, even as they declare for the peace, their hands reach out with an instinctive spasm ... in the direction of their comforts, their home, their security, their income, their future, their plans—that five-year plan of studies, that ten-year plan of professional status, that twenty-year plan of family growth and unity, that fifty-year plan of decent life and honorable natural demise. "Of course, let us have the peace," we cry, "but at the same time let us have normalcy, let us lose nothing, let our lives stand intact, let us know neither prison nor ill repute nor disruption of ties." And because we must encompass this and protect that, and because at all costs—at all costs—our hopes must march on schedule, and because it is unheard of that in the name of peace a sword should fall, disjoining that fine and cunning web that our lives have woven, because it is unheard of that good men should suffer injustice or families be sundered or good repute be lost—because of this we cry peace and cry peace, and there is no peace. There is no peace because there are no peacemakers. There are no makers of peace because the making of peace is at least as costly as the making of war—at least as exigent, at least as disruptive, at least as liable to bring disgrace and prison and death in its wake.

Bearing the cross, living in truth, is not about the pursuit of happiness. It does not embrace the illusion of inevitable human progress. It is not about achieving wealth, celebrity or power. It entails sacrifice. It is about our neighbor. The organs of state security monitor and harass you. They amass huge files on your activities. They disrupt your life. They throw you in prison, even when, like Julian, you did not commit a crime. It is not a new story. Nor is our indifference to evil; palpable evil we can see in front of us, new.

In the reading from the Hebrew Bible we hear the story of the prophet Jeremiah. He, like Julian, exposed the corruption and lust for war by the powerful. He warned of the catastrophe that inevitably comes when the covenant with God is broken. He condemned idolatry, the corruption of kings, priests and false prophets. Jeremiah was arrested, beaten and put in stocks. He was forbidden from preaching. An attempt was made on his life. After Egypt was conquered by Babylon, and Judea began to prepare for war, Jeremiah delivered an oracle warning the king to maintain peace. King Zedekiah ignored him. Babylon besieged Jerusalem. Jeremiah was arrested and imprisoned. He was freed by the Babylonians after Jerusalem's conquest, but was exiled to Egypt, where, according to the Biblical tradition, he was stoned to death.

Jeremiah, like Julian, understood that a society that prohibits the capacity to speak in truth extinguishes the capacity to live in justice.

Yes, all of us who know and admire Julian decry his prolonged suffering and the suffering of his family. Yes, we demand that the many wrongs and injustices that have been visited upon him end. Yes, we honor him for his courage and his integrity. But the battle for Julian's liberty has always been much more than the persecution of a publisher. It is the most important battle for press freedom, and truth, of our era. And if we lose this battle, it will be devastating, not only for Julian and his family, but for us.

Tyrannies, from Biblical times to the present, invert the rule of law. They turn the law into an instrument of injustice. They cloak their crimes in a faux legality. They use the decorum of the courts and trials, to mask their criminality. Those, such as Julian, who expose that criminality to the public are dangerous, for without the pretext of legitimacy the tyranny loses credibility and has nothing left in its arsenal but fear, coercion and violence.

The long campaign against Julian and WikiLeaks is a window into the collapse of the rule of law, the rise of what the political philosopher Sheldon Wolin calls our system of "inverted totalitarianism," a form of totalitarianism that maintains the fictions of the old capitalist democracy, including its institutions, iconography, patriotic symbols and rhetoric, but internally has surrendered total control to the dictates of global corporations.

I was in the London courtroom during Julian's extradition hearing overseen by Judge Vanessa Baraitser, an updated version of the Queen of Hearts in "Alice in Wonderland", demanding the sentence before pronouncing the verdict. It was a judicial farce. There was no legal basis to hold Julian in prison. There was no legal basis to try him, an Australian citizen, under the U.S. Espionage Act. The CIA spied on Julian in the embassy through the Spanish company, UC Global, contracted to provide embassy security. This spying included recording the privileged conversations between Julian and his lawyers as they discussed his defense. This fact alone invalidated the hearing. Julian is being held in a high security prison so the state can, as Nils Melzer, the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Torture, has testified, continue the degrading abuse and torture it hopes will lead to his psychological, if not physical disintegration.

The U.S. government directed London barrister James Lewis. Lewis presented these directives to Baraitser. Baraitser adopted them as her legal decision. It was a judicial pantomime. Lewis and the judge insisted they were not attempting to criminalize journalists and muzzle the press while they busily set up the legal framework to criminalize journalists and muzzle the press. And that is why the court worked so hard to mask the proceedings from the public; limiting access to the courtroom to a handful of observers and making it hard, and at times impossible, to access the hearing online. It was a tawdry show trial, not an example of the best of English jurisprudence, but the Lubyanka.

Prophets call for justice in an unjust world. What they demand is not radical. On the political spectrum it is conservative. The restoration of the rule of law. It is simple and basic. It should not, in a functioning democracy, be incendiary. But living in truth in a despotic system is the supreme act of defiance. This truth terrifies those in power.

The architects of imperialism, the masters of war, the corporate-controlled legislative, judicial and executive branches of government and their obsequious courtiers in the media, are illegitimate. Say this simple truth and you are banished, as many of us have been, to the margins of the media landscape. Prove this truth, as Julian, Chelsea Manning, Jeremy Hammond and Edward Snowden have done by allowing us to peer into the inner workings of power, and you are hunted down and persecuted.

In Oct. 2010, WikiLeaks released the Iraq War Logs. The War Logs documented numerous U.S. war crimes — including video images of the gunning down of two Reuters journalists and 10 other unarmed civilians in the "Collateral Murder" video, the routine torture of Iraqi prisoners, the covering up of thousands of civilian deaths and the killing of nearly 700 civilians who approached too closely to U.S. checkpoints. The towering civil rights attorneys Len Weinglass and my good friend Michael Ratner — who I would later accompany to meet Julian in the Ecuadoran Embassy — met with Julian in a studio apartment in Central London. Julian's personal bank cards had been blocked. Three encrypted laptops

with documents detailing U.S. war crimes had disappeared from his luggage en route to London. Swedish police were fabricating a case against him in a move, Ratner warned, was about extraditing Julian to the United States.

“WikiLeaks and you personally are facing a battle that is both legal and political,” Weinglass told Julian. “As we learned in the Pentagon Papers case, the US government doesn’t like the truth coming out. And it doesn’t like to be humiliated. No matter if it’s Nixon or Bush or Obama, Republican or Democrat in the White House. The US government will try to stop you from publishing its ugly secrets. And if they have to destroy you and the First Amendment and the rights of publishers with you, they are willing to do it. We believe they are going to come after WikiLeaks and you, Julian, as the publisher.”

“Come after me for what?” asked Julian.

“Espionage,” Weinglass continued. “They’re going to charge Bradley Manning with treason under the Espionage Act of 1917. We don’t think it applies to him because he’s a whistleblower, not a spy. And we don’t think it applies to you either because you are a publisher. But they are going to try to force Manning into implicating you as his collaborator.”

“Come after me for what?”

That is the question.

They came after Julian not for his vices, but his virtues.

They came after Julian because he exposed the more than 15,000 unreported deaths of Iraqi civilians; because he exposed the torture and abuse of some 800 men and boys, aged between 14 and 89, at Guantánamo; because he exposed that Hillary Clinton in 2009 ordered U.S. diplomats to spy on U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and other U.N. representatives from China, France, Russia, and the U.K., spying that included obtaining DNA, iris scans, fingerprints, and personal passwords (part of the long pattern of illegal surveillance that included the eavesdropping on U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan in the weeks before the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003); because he exposed that Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and the CIA backed the June 2009 military coup in Honduras that overthrew the democratically elected president Manuel Zelaya, replacing him with a murderous and corrupt military regime; because he exposed that George W. Bush, Barack Obama and General David Petraeus prosecuted a war in Iraq that under post-Nuremberg laws is defined as a criminal war of aggression, a war crime; that they authorized hundreds of targeted assassinations, including those of U.S. citizens in Yemen, and that they secretly launched missile, bomb, and drone attacks on Yemen, killing scores of civilians; because Julian exposed the contents of the speeches Hillary Clinton gave to Goldman Sachs for which she was paid \$675,000, a sum so large it can only be considered a bribe, and that she privately assured corporate leaders she would do their bidding while promising the public financial regulation and reform; because he exposed how the hacking tools used by the CIA and the National Security Agency permits the wholesale government surveillance of our televisions, computers, smart phones and anti-virus software, allowing the government to record and store our conversations, images and private text messages, even from encrypted apps.

Julian exposed the truth. He exposed it over and over and over until there was no question of the endemic illegality, corruption and mendacity that defines the global ruling class. And for these truths they came after Julian, as they have come after all who dared rip back the veil on power. “Red Rosa now has vanished too,” Bertolt Brecht wrote after the German socialist Rosa Luxemburg was murdered. “She told the poor what life is about, And so the rich have rubbed her out.”

We have undergone a corporate coup, where poor and working men and women are reduced to joblessness and hunger, where war, financial speculation and internal surveillance are the only real business of the state, where even habeas corpus no longer exists, where we, as citizens, are nothing

more than commodities to corporate systems of power, ones to be used, fleeced and discarded.

To refuse to fight back, to reach out and help the weak, the oppressed and the suffering, to save the planet from ecocide, to decry the domestic and international crimes of the ruling class, to demand justice, to live in truth, is to bear the mark of Cain. Those in power must feel our wrath, and this means constant acts of mass civil disobedience, it means constant acts of social and political disruption, for this organized power from below is the only power that will save us and the only power that will free Julian. Politics is a game of fear. It is our moral and civic duty to make those in power very, very afraid.

The criminal ruling class has all of us locked in its death grip. It cannot be reformed. It has abolished the rule of law. It obscures and falsifies the truth. It seeks the consolidation of its obscene wealth and power. But to do this, we must, as Julian has done, as all prophets have done, pick up the cross and bear its awful weight on our back.

“This is the cross that we must bear for the freedom of our people...” Martin Luther King Jr. reminds us. “The cross we bear precedes the crown we wear. To be a Christian, one must take up the cross, with all its difficulties agonizing and tension-packed content and carry it until that very cross leaves its marks upon us and redeems us, to that more excellent way which comes only through suffering...When I took up the cross, I recognized its meaning...The cross is something you bear, and ultimately that you die on.”

“Hope has two beautiful daughters,” Augustine writes. “Their names are anger and courage; anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are.”

Those who hold fast to the eternal and the sacred, to truth, as the sociologist Emile Durkheim understood, are not merely those who see new truths of which most others are ignorant, but are men and women, possessed by sublime madness, who are driven by a transcendent force that allows them to endure the trials of existence or conquer them. They transform the world through suffering.

My friend Julian is suffering. He is suffering for our sins and our indifference. As Rabbi Heschel reminds us, “some are guilty, but all are responsible.” There are two choices. We stand for the truth, for Julian, and free him. We find the courage to be responsible, to pick up the cross. Or we are complicit in the dark night of corporate tyranny that will envelope us all.

Let us pray:

God of grace and God of glory

In thy people pour thy power;

Crown thine ancient church's story,

Bring her bud to glorious flower.

Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,

For the facing of this hour

For the facing of this hour.

Amen



Radio Habana Cuba