

March 28, 2021

Homily Manuscript

On Jesus' Passion (Mk 14:26-15:47)

The narrative reading of Jesus' passion we've just heard is not only an appropriate way for us to begin Holy Week. It is also an apt way for us to wind up this season of Lent we've been in, because it shows us not only what Jesus has done for us and how much he loved us, the events culminating in Jesus' death on the cross also expose the depth of human sin that we need salvation from.

In Mark's telling, a whole cast of characters demonstrate the reality of our sin as being a betrayal of Christ's lordship as well as our human capacity to do this in all sorts of ways.

- First, there is Peter's overconfidence in himself, as he pridefully exclaimed that even though others will fall away, he would not. Of course, pride cometh before the fall, and Jesus rightly prophesies that Peter would do quite the opposite, before the cock crowed. But how many times have we deluded ourselves into believing we are somehow stronger than our sin only to find ourselves doing the very things we don't want to be doing, and realizing that in order for our lives to bear good fruit we must be connected to the vine of Christ and His Spirit.
- But it's not just Peter denying Jesus three times. Before that, Jesus takes Peter with him to the Garden of Gethsemane, as well as his two other closest disciples, James and John. And this is truly Jesus' hour of greatest need. We're told he was greatly distressed and troubled. So he asks them to keep watch while he prays, just to be near him while he pours out his heart & soul to the Father. And yet, twice he turns back to find them *asleep*.
 - Have you ever failed a friend? I'm not saying has a friend ever thought you've failed them, I'm saying have we ever failed to give them the support and encouragement God would have us give? Or ghosted them in their time of need because of our own stuff?
 - Or perhaps even outright betrayed them?
- That, of course, is what Judas did. Judas used an action meant for love - a kiss - to betray the man he had committed to follow and known intimately for three years. Now, we may say to ourselves, "I've never betrayed anyone like Judas betrayed Jesus!" Well, maybe, maybe not. But surely even the most solemn vows we've made have not been kept perfectly.
 - For example, those who have made marriage vows: "to love and to cherish," "for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health."
 - Or how about our baptismal vows, such as to "obediently keep God's holy will and commandments, and walk in them all the days of our life"? Of course we have. That is why that vow is followed with the response, "I will, the Lord being my helper."
- And then we have the chief priests, the ruling Council, and the scribes - even Pilate. Each of *them* had spent their lives building a little kingdom for themselves, where their own will reigned, where what they wanted to happen, happened. And here this Jesus came along and threatened it all.

- And have we not felt similarly threatened by the lordship of Jesus? Jesus, after all, demands our whole lives. Yet, how often we resist. The salvation Jesus offers is not like some product we throw in our cart at Target. No, he demands our all. And the Gospel - the good news - is that we do not have to wait for heaven for the kingdom of God to begin to transform our lives - salvation is at hand - but it requires that we let Him reign, that we give up control; as Dolores said last week that we put down our pencils and let him begin to write our story, to author our lives. And the chief priests and scribes weren't having it; just as sometimes - perhaps often - neither are we. #
- What about the crowd in the passion story? Stirred up and manipulated by their leaders to cry out for Jesus to be crucified; to trade the son of God for Barabbas, an insurrectionist and murderer. It would be too easy for me to compare this to those who may have downplayed or winked at the insurrectionists who stormed the U.S. capitol on January 6 all the while blaspheming Jesus' name. But such application would also be too narrow. the prophet Isaiah says, "Woe to those who say that evil is good and good is evil, that dark is light and light is dark, that bitter is sweet and sweet is bitter" (5:20). This is what the crowd was doing, but we are certainly not immune from doing the same thing. There are plenty of us who were aghast at January 6, but who will still justify the use of immoral means by our leaders or in our own lives, to accomplish ends that we desire or believe in. #

So, we must not consider the different parties in Jesus' passion as being separate from us. Rather, they represented us, and all of humanity, to varying degrees. In them, we find no shortage of failures that we should be able to identify with, to understand how all of us are complicit in the crucifixion of Jesus by virtue of our being human. In fact, if I can turn your attention for a moment to your bulletin, today I have included Andreas Pavius's magnificent Icon of the Crucifixion from the late 15th century. And there is a lot going on in it. In fact, I commend it to you for further contemplation during this Holy Week.



But two elements that serve as visual reminders of our own complicity in Jesus' death are first the skull in the dark portion at the bottom. This represents the skull of Adam and therefore the sin that we are all born into. And yet, you will notice the blood of Jesus is dripping on the skull, representing the forgiveness and redemption of our sins that comes through Christ's shed blood. Then second, in the crowd gathered at the foot of the cross, you can see among the Roman soldiers there are men wearing different kinds of hats. And this is representative of people from all different social classes and ethnic groups whose sin like ours proclaims 'crucify him', as we proclaimed today.¹ Or as Paul writes, "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."² #

But despite all of us being complicit in the death of Jesus simply by virtue of being sinners and members of the fallen human race, I would be remiss if I didn't *a/so* still acknowledge that no single individual put Jesus to death alone; rather Jesus was put to death by a system. And this reflects how the fallenness of this world is not just a conglomeration of individuals who sin personally, but of systems, that oppress individuals, humans made in God's image.

And this is something we've been acknowledging during Lent this year in particular.

¹ <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/april-2014/icon-of-the-crucifixion-at-the-getty-villa>

² Romans 3:23

On two recent Sundays we looked at Obery Hendricks explanation of Jesus' cleansing of the Temple and the Feeding of the 5,000 as Jesus offering himself as an alternative to hoping in the corrupt powers of his day and following him as a means for being in this world but not of this world.

And the last three Wednesday nights, our homilies on the visions from Revelation 12 and 13 have set in stark relief the way of Jesus, the lamb who was slain and the way that empire, the beast. We've talked about how Jesus conquers through sacrificial love and calls us to do the same, while empire conquers through oppression and exploitation, which is anti-Christ. And empires in any age therefore offer us a false gospel of prosperity and security, that is intoxicating and plays off our fears, but is ultimately rotten. So, as Paul writes in Ephesians our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this world's darkness, and (the spiritual forces of evil behind them) in the heavenly realms." And the icon serves to give one this sense as well, I think. That it is those powers and principalities - through empire - who ultimately put the Son of God to death.

And so, this lent I've been thinking a lot - perhaps many of us have - about how do we live faithfully not just in a world of sinners, where we're all sinners, but in a world of fallen systems? What this icon depicts is not just the world back then, it's our world now. The world remains this way, and to a large extent we are powerless to change that; it will be this way until Christ returns. And so, returning to the passion story I think about the women Mark describes: Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joses, and Salome. In those days, these women were completely powerless. Mark says they were looking on from a distance as all of this transpired and watched where Jesus was laid in a tomb. And to some extent, this is our plight, to pray for acceptance and to grieve what we cannot control.

However, our plight is likely not altogether powerless. To the contrary, each one of us has been and will be faced with opportunities to act in faithfulness and be a witness.

And Jesus taught that we do that by taking up our cross and imitating him. But looking back one last time to the passion narrative, there are three more characters I've not yet mentioned who, despite demonstrating at least some virtue, fail to do what faithfulness in that moment would require.

1. First there was Simon of Cyrene. We saw that he was compelled by the Roman soldiers to carry Jesus' cross after Jesus became too weak to do so. Two years ago I shared how Rwandan scholar Emmanuel Katangole acknowledges that Simon displayed the virtue of obedience: Simon obeys the Roman soldiers and we can even charitably assume that he does this with compassion toward Jesus as well. But Simon's obedience here also allows him to save himself from suffering. Katangole explains that Simon's supposed virtue of *obedience* prevents him "from seeing that there are times when we are called to stand up against injustice and not bow to earthly authorities." Katangole implies that what faithfulness really would've required for Simon would have been to refuse to be complicit in Jesus' execution, come what may.
2. Then there is the centurion, who after Jesus died *proclaimed*, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" This has been taken to be a statement of faith, and rightly so. But prior to this, the centurion displayed the virtue of loyalty to Rome, and the limits of the virtue were exposed as he stood by and watched an innocent man die. We too can be hindered by a loyalty to human beings that causes us to stop short of taking up our cross. But all too

often, we allow the norms & expectations of our family and culture - fear of them, really - constrain us from doing what we know is right. #

3. And finally, once Jesus is taken down, the centurion assists one Joseph of Arimathea in retrieving the body, so Joseph can provide Jesus with the burial of a nobleman: being laid in a tomb, despite having just been executed like a criminal. But as laudable as it may seem, at the end of the day it is fair to wonder what difference it makes. So Jesus gets a nice burial, so what? This is like praising and celebrating Jesus when it's easy, on Sunday mornings and so on, but when it's difficult, during the week, standing by.

Now look, I'm not trying to pile on these guys. And I'm certainly - and I mean certainly - not suggesting that I would've conducted *myself* any more faithfully than they did. But in light of their roles in this story - their partial failures - we are reminded the only real hero in scripture is God - Jesus. He is the one we ought always to look to and His son is who we are to seek to imitate. And Jesus doesn't ask us to do anything he was unwilling to.

But to do what he did - to remain faithful - Jesus had to believe that no matter what happened and what he had to endure, that the Father would vindicate and glorify him. So I have to wonder if through some of this - perhaps in the Garden of Gethsemane, perhaps as he trudged toward Golgotha - Jesus didn't have the story of Abraham and Isaac in his mind. Where Abraham placed faithfulness to God above everything, even his own son, and the Lord honored the faithfulness by providing a ram and metaphorically raising Isaac to life.

So as Paul wrote in our passage from Philippians this morning (in verse 8), that Jesus "being found in human form... humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (verse 9) ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name."

Living in a world where sin is not just individual, but systemic, courage-in-godliness and empathy toward others is not often encouraged and is rarely rewarded. So following Jesus requires that we learn to surrender ourselves into God's hands and ask his help to be faithful when we are given opportunities to love Him & our fellow man, and to trust that he will exalt us as well. This is the path of eternal life.

And yet, we know we will not do this perfectly; though we are called to imitate Jesus, we are not him. And so, like everyone else in the passion narrative, there are times when we will fail. And that is when we must allow repentance and receiving the forgiveness won for us through his perfect sacrifice - make up for our failure and just keep on following Him.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

