

*Good Friday Year A*

*Lections: Isa. 52:13-53:12; Ps. 69:1-23; Heb. 10:16-25; John 18:1-19:42*

As I said for my Palm Sunday homily, there is not much more that needs to be said tonight, not with the words of the Passion story from John's Gospel still ringing in our ears. But what does need to be said, tonight, and every time we contemplate the cross is that it was all done for us, on our behalf, for our benefit. The reason Jesus was willing to go this far, to suffer death in one of the cruelest ways humankind has devised, was to show us just how far God will go to love us and to liberate us from everything that separates us from God.

But since we are a small and faithful group this night, I want to take this opportunity to draw our focus to some elements of the Passion story that can get overlooked in the sweep of the grand drama of it all, and to ask what they might mean for us tonight.

The first is the great care our translation from the Common English Bible has taken to try and make it as clear as possible who was humanly responsible for Jesus's death. As I preached on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent, when using John's Gospel, we have to take in the context both of John's time, when Jewish Christians were a distinct minority of a minority in the Roman Empire, and the historic scope of Jewish-Christian relations since then. We must remember that our forebears in our faith systematically discriminated and far too often engaged in genocide out of a wrong belief that the non-Christian Jews of Jesus's time all wanted him, a faithful Jew, killed and as such, that they bore collective responsibility through the ages for a crime they did not commit.

Our translation points out that it was specific people, men of power and prestige, who arrested Jesus at prayer, tried him in a hastily arranged courtroom in the middle of the night, and turned him over to the imperial Roman government. It might be easy for us, with this story so ingrained, perhaps influenced by seeing Jesus Christ Superstar one too many times, to think of Caiaphas, Annas, and the other priests and Jewish political elite, as uncomplicated villains, driven only by hate. But I hope we all know human beings are more complex than that. No one is fully evil. And of all people, we who are Americans, citizens of a superpower, should have at least a bit of sympathy for the puppet rulers of a client state who only desire to avoid an imperial crackdown on their people. In all our moral messiness, all our mixed motivations, all our "good" parts and our "bad" parts, Jesus died for us.

The second character this night allows us to examine is Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor. One thing I've noticed for some years now is that besides Jesus, there are only two people mentioned by name in the Creeds we say every week: his mother, Mary, who brought him into this world, and Pilate, who ordered him taken out of it. The first, a poor, young woman, is an example of devout faith in God and Their promises to Israel. The other, a powerful man in his prime, is an example of complete indifference to the customs and beliefs of the people he rules over. There is

mutual incomprehension between Jesus and Pilate in John's Gospel; it is like they are talking past each other. And it is Pilate's inability to understand Jesus, to see him for who he truly is, which compounds Jesus's agony as his soldiers whip and humiliate him. Yet, despite all the times *our own* inability to fully comprehend Jesus, to discern what he asks of us and then to do it, despite the hurt that causes him, he died for us.

And near the end of it all, as an innocent man hangs from the shameful cross, he sees the few disciples who stayed. Mostly women, they risk their very lives to keep watch as Jesus dies. We can only imagine their grief and despair, their fear and their shattered hopes. Among them, Jesus sees his mother, Mary, who, like the mothers of Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, and George Floyd, and every mother of every victim of state violence, should never have seen her son die this way. Jesus sees Mary and even as he suffers, he longs for her safety, and so entrusts her to his beloved disciple, making them into the first of the church, the community that will remember him. So that we might find our way back to this broken yet beloved community, my friends, Jesus died for us.

And yet, even here—as he declares it finished, as he breathes his last breath, and a spear pierces his side, as he is quickly taken down from the cross and prepared for a hasty burial—even here there are glimpses that the love he has shown and the truth he has proclaimed have been *seeds* planted in the unlikely hearts of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. Despite their membership in the Jewish elite and despite the fact that it was Nicodemus, all the way back on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent, who couldn't quite bring himself to take Jesus at his word at their first meeting, here are two men, two unlikely disciples, who offer Jesus a burial with the royal dignity that was denied his death. And still is for unlikely, late-coming, even skeptical disciples like us that Jesus dies as well.

And so, like those disciples: like the three Marys and John, like Joseph and Nicodemus, we grieve, and we mourn all the pains and losses of our lives, those still fresh as crucifixion wounds and those lying in tombs. And at Jesus's own tomb we wait and watch, with seeds of his love, seeds of his liberation, seeds of his hope for new life waiting to spring up in us again. Amen.