

March 28, 2010
Palm Sunday/ The Passion of Christ

Hymn of Preparation Tell Me the Stories of Jesus #277

The First Reading Palm Sunday Luke 19: 28-40

After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it."

Meditation

The stones will shout out if we are silent as Jesus Christ passes by! The stones will shout! All those people shouting on Palm Sunday, singing hosanna, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord-----they were so excited by his power, so grateful for many healings, so amazed at the presence of God among them, that they came to see him pass by, and they shouted his name, overflowing with praise and worship! And so I ask you, how can we be silent? It's only because we do not recognize the Christ who is still with us. We don't see what Christ is doing for us and we don't know who he is even when he's 9.18007(e)-0.616744(n).6c-0.614653()-4.58

The Second Reading The Temple**Luke 19:45-48, Luke 21:5-6**

Then he entered the Temple and began to drive out those who were selling things there; and he said, "It is written, 'My house shall be a house of prayer', but you have made it a den of robbers."

Every day he was teaching the people in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him; but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard.

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

Meditation

The temple was the Holy Place, the center for Jewish life and worship. Even though there were synagogues all over the country for weekly worship, every person wanted to worship at the temple at the very least on the high Holy Days. Being at the temple was a holy experience. Worship there was all wrapped up in sacredness and tradition and scripture and history.

For the money-changers to be there and make a profit from the sale of sacrificial animals and special temple coins was a desecration, an abomination. When these tables were first set up, it was as a service to the people coming to worship, so that they could have appropriately pure and unblemished animals for sacrifices, and coins that were not issued by the Roman government, so that offerings could be holy and not dirty money. But it had become a racket, a way to gouge money out of the poor.

Jesus saw it for what it was and he was determined to clean things up.

A little while later he foretold the destruction of the temple, a prediction that was too horrible for anyone to think about. To state publicly that the temple would be destroyed was heard as a threat, a challenge.

So first Jesus had changed the status quo, and then he had threatened the tradition.

What is in our lives that we hold so high that anything said against it is taken as a challenge? Jesus was talking about and bringing about change. Change is never easy, but when do we cross the line between struggling to adapt to change and drawing a line in the sand and digging in our heels? When do our traditions and our history become more sacred to us than our own experience of the Living God?

We need to examine our own lives....

The Third Reading The Lord's Supper and the Betrayal

Based on Luke 22: 1-22

It was nearly time for the Festival of Unleavened Bread, also called the Passover. The chief priests and the scribes were trying to come up with a way to get rid of Jesus because they were afraid of all the people who were following him. Judas Iscariot gave in to temptation and went to the people in charge of the temple and made a deal with them to betray Jesus to them in return for money. All Judas needed was a time and a place to turn Jesus over when the crowd wasn't around.

When Passover came, Jesus sent Peter and John into the city to make arrangements for celebrating the Passover meal. They followed Jesus' instructions and found the house where they would have their ceremonial meal in the upper room. There they shared the wine and the bread of the Lord's Last Supper. As Jesus took

the cup of wine, he told them that he would not drink it again until the kingdom of God comes. As he broke the bread and shared it with them he told them it was his body, given for them, and that they should re-enact this meal in remembrance of him.

He also told them that the person who would betray him was in the room with them.

Meditation

Three things happen in this passage. First, Judas initiates a plot to hand Jesus over to the authorities. They could have arrested him at any time when he was in the temple or walking in the streets or teaching----any time. But it would have caused a riot among all the people that followed Jesus everywhere. They wanted to avoid the public outrage that might have gotten in the way and that might even have resulted in the Roman soldiers having to step in.

So what they needed from Judas, for a small fee, was to know where he was when the crowds were not with him. Judas, knowing that it was Jesus' habit to go off by himself to pray, knew that there would be an opportunity in the garden of Gethsemane, late at night.

The second thing that happened was that the apostles and Jesus had their Passover meal in an upper room. This was Jesus' Last Supper that we celebrate when we celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion.

The third thing that happens is that Jesus announces that his betrayer, the one who will turn him in when he is not surrounded by a crowd, is in the room. He doesn't name this man.

Imagine Judas' reaction-----imagine his heart skipping a beat as his eyes meet the eyes of Christ and then look away quickly. "If he knows, why doesn't he tell them? They could stop me! I wonder how he knows! I wonder if he hates me." And then he turns away and slips out of the room into the darkness.

Judas had spent hours, months, years, with Jesus, listening to him teach and talk, sharing meals with him. How did he miss the point? What was it that led him to turn Jesus over to the power of darkness for a few silver coins?

Fear. And arrogance.

Maybe he was afraid of the Romans who would sooner or later clamp down on this small, insignificant country, or at least the revolutionary group of people led by the one named Jesus. Maybe he was afraid that Jesus really would change the world so much that he couldn't stand it! Maybe he was afraid of the power he saw and felt in Jesus and just wanted it all to stop!

Arrogance----Judas had already spoken up to contradict Jesus. When Mary anointed Jesus' feet with expensive perfume, Judas had said it was a waste of money, that they could have fed the poor with the money that the perfume cost. He thought he knew a better use for that money than Jesus did. I am sure he bristled when Jesus corrected him.

Maybe Judas thought Jesus would never be convicted and so he would have this extra money to help others and everything would be alright.

Or maybe, just maybe, Judas believed that God would not let Jesus die, that there would be a huge miracle that everyone would see and the whole world would come to believe.

Whatever Judas thought or believed, scripture tells us that "Satan had entered into him." His thinking was directed by Satan and even if it seemed justified to him, Judas was not thinking correctly.

Sometimes we don't think correctly, either. Our thoughts, and even what we think we believe, can be very wrong-headed, and yet we come up with our own rationale, our own justifications.

The only way to tell if what we think and believe are right and not the result of "Satan entering into us" is to pray and pray and pray some more. The more time we spend with God, the more we will know what is right. If we are afraid, or arrogant, or too stubborn to listen, we are not hearing Jesus. The ultimate betrayal of Jesus is to know that he is with us and to choose to ignore what he is saying.

Fourth Reading Jesus Prays on the Mount of Olives

Luke 22:39-44

He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. When he reached the place, he said to them, "Pray that you may not come into the time of trial." Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down,

and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done."

Meditation

I have a young friend named Roger who lives around the corner from me. We have had many conversations about his struggles to understand the way life is and why parents make the decisions they do. Occasionally we talk about God.

One day Roger came over to me as I was working in my front yard and pulled out a list of "The Seven Deadly Sins." He wanted to read me this list and talk about it to "make me a better person." But really he wanted to understand what envy and gluttony and sloth were. We got stuck on envy. He thought it was thinking that life is hard and the conversation started going in circles. There was a long pause as I searched for different words that he could understand.

Before I came up with a good answer, he said, "Do you think the reason that life is so tough is that God is not over-protective?" One of the recurring themes in my conversations with Roger has been whether or not his mother is over-protective. But when he applied that term in this context, he had me. This conversation was clearly no longer about me helping him understand anything. My mouth opened and then I shut it again. After a minute, I said, "I never thought about it like that, Roger. I think that is exactly right. God is not over-protective. God lets stuff happen to us. God cares about us when life is tough, but God doesn't keep bad stuff from happening."

God is not over-protective of us, and God was not over-protective of Jesus. God could have saved his only begotten Son from being crucified, but he didn't. He chose to let his Son suffer.

Suffering is part of the human condition, and Jesus suffered in solidarity, in unity, with us. Any time that we suffer, we know that we worship a God who understands, who knows, who has felt our pain-----because Jesus suffered on the cross. We don't have a distant God who is insulated and isolated from our earthly existence. Instead, we have a God who is with us in everything we go through, who does not turn his back on us in our hour of need.

God is not a magic being who rescues us from the consequences of being human when we want to avoid pain. God is always with us, God does not abandon us, God holds us all the way through our suffering. Because he has suffered, too!

The Fifth Reading**Betrayal and Arrest of Jesus****Luke 22:47-53**

While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; but Jesus said to him, "Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?" When those who were around him saw what was coming, they asked, "Lord, should we strike with the sword?" Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear.

But Jesus said, "No more of this!" And he touched his ear and healed him. Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who had come for him, "Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!"

Meditation

“This is your hour, and the power of darkness!” Chilling words. Words that sound like surrender from the very one who it seems should never surrender!

Jesus had begun his ministry at a wedding in Cana. His mother, Mary, came to him and told him that there was no more wine. He answered her, “What is that to me? My hour has not yet come!” And yet he went ahead and performed his first miracle, turning water into wine, claiming that his hour had in fact come, with his deeds, not his words.

And now he is in the garden of Gethsemane, turning that hour, that time, over to the power of darkness, to these chief priests and temple police and elders. Relinquishing it to whatever would happen, surrendering to the worst that people can do to each other, giving up his life. Suffering the pain and agony just like we do. Suffering with us. Suffering at our hands. And the pain of betrayal continues with the words of Peter...

The Sixth Reading Peter Denies Knowing Jesus**Luke 22:54-62**

Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance. When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, "This man also was with him." But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not!" Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, "Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean." But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about!" At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

Meditation

First betrayed by one of his twelve chosen and then denied by the one who once announced “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God!” Peter, the Rock, turned into jelly with fear on the night Jesus needed him most. Three times people asked him if he was one of the disciples of Jesus, and three times he stated emphatically “I do not know the man!”

And Jesus heard him. Blow upon blow, each denial added to the abandonment that Jesus felt as his followers left him. Peter cared enough to try to be with him, but fear took over and self-preservation took the form of lying, denying the relationship that mattered most.

What are you afraid of? Peter had good reason to be afraid. There might easily have been a fourth cross on the hill that afternoon.

What are you afraid of? If you refuse to deny Jesus, what might it cost you? In this country we don't have to fear for our lives because we're Christians. But sometimes it can cost us friends, popularity, a promotion at work, respect, even the opportunity to have fun and socialize with certain people we like very much. And sometimes those costs seem like too much.

Whenever we act against what we know to be right, whenever we have an opportunity to share what Christ has done for us and we don't share, whenever we act like someone we're not, we deny Christ.

How many times will you deny knowing him before you realize that he is looking at you with a look of great sadness on his face?

The Seventh Reading Jesus on Trial

Based on Luke 22:63-23:25

The men who were holding Jesus mocked him and beat him, and insulted him in every way they could think of. When the next day, Friday, dawned, they took him to the chief priests and the scribes for questioning. They asked him, "Are you the Son of God?" When he answered, "You say that I am," they became angry, convinced that he was committing blasphemy.

They took him to Pilate, who asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "You say so." Pilate was not convinced of his guilt and refused to condemn him, but the crowd insisted, saying that he was a rabble-rouser who incited the people.

Pilate, hearing that Jesus was from Galilee, sent him to Herod, because Herod was in charge of Galilee. Herod was eager to see Jesus and wanted to see him perform some kind of miracle. Jesus did not say anything when Herod asked him questions, even though the chief priests and scribes were accusing him loudly.

Herod and his soldiers treated him with scorn, mocking him. Herod then sent him back to Pilate.

Pilate called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people and told them that neither he nor Herod found any guilt in Jesus. To make them happy, he had Jesus flogged. The crowd began yelling for Jesus to be crucified and instead release an insurgent named Barabbas, who was guilty of inciting a riot and of murder. The crowd got louder and more insistent, shouting, "Release Barabbas! Crucify Jesus! Crucify him, crucify him!" Pilate gave in and released Barabbas and handed Jesus over to be crucified.

Meditation

Mob mentality is an ugly thing. First just a few people begin yelling hateful, angry words. Then another person joins in, then a few more. Pretty soon it seems like that many people must be right, so more people join in, certain that the first people must have a point, there must be something really there to be angry about. Fear is also a factor. If all the people around you are angry and loud, you might worry that if you don't join in, they will turn on you.

And this is the situation. People were caught up in the moment, in the emotions, in the anger and the fear. People who were normally quite reasonable, who may not even agreed that the death penalty was justified, found themselves shouting for Jesus to be crucified. "This is your hour, and the power of darkness."

The Eighth Reading

The Crucifixion, Death, and Burial of Jesus

Based on Luke 23: 26-56

The soldiers made Simon of Cyrene carry the cross that Jesus would be crucified on. A huge crowd followed them, including women who were crying loudly. Jesus told them not to weep for him. He said that instead they should weep for themselves and their children because very terrible days were coming.

Two criminals were taken to the same place, a place called “The Skull”, to be crucified on each side of Jesus. Jesus prayed for the people who were crucifying him, saying “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” The soldiers gambled to see who would get his clothes. The people stood by, watching, while the leaders mocked him, saying, “He saved others, let him save himself if he is the Messiah, the chosen one of God!” The soldiers also mocked him and offered him sour wine to drink.

Someone put a sign above his head that said, "This is the King of the Jews." One of the criminals next to him joined in the derision and said, "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him, saying, "Have you no fear of God? At least we are getting what we deserve for our crimes, but this man has done nothing wrong!" Then, speaking to Jesus, he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered, "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

By this time it was noon on Friday. Even though it was the middle of the day, everything got dark until about 3 in the afternoon. The sun's light failed. The curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." And then he breathed his last breath. The Roman centurion standing by praised God and said, "Surely this man was innocent."

The crowd who had gathered to watch this gruesome spectacle went back to their homes, beating their breasts with sorrow. But everyone who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, kept watching from a distance.

A good and righteous man named Joseph who was a member of the council had not agreed to the plan to have Jesus killed. He was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. His request was approved, so he took the body down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in an unused tomb carved from rock. He did this before sunset, when the Sabbath would begin. The women from Galilee followed him to see where the body was put so that they could come back after the Sabbath and anoint the body for proper burial.

Meditation

And so it is finished. Jesus dies. A Roman centurion is touched enough to declare that he was certainly innocent. The crowd who had shouted for his crucifixion and then followed to watch, went home, beating their breasts. They had come to their senses enough to feel remorse over what had happened.

A good man, Joseph of Arimathea, asked Pilate for permission to take the body, wanting to give Jesus a decent burial and not leave the body there, exposed to the elements.

The women followed to see where the body was taken, so they could take care of it properly after the Sabbath was over.

Jesus, the Messiah, was dead. Hopes of the Kingdom of God being established were dead. Dreams of a king of David's lineage sitting on the throne and ruling over Israel were gone.

Jesus is dead. The disciples are in hiding. The women prepare the spices for anointing the dead. The tomb is sealed with a boulder---- a huge stone. Will it be one of the stones that cries out to praise Jesus Christ now that the crowd is silent? Or will there be praises sung in a different key?

Offering