

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC April 14, 2019
Palm Sunday Lk: 22:14-23:56

Throughout history any number of Christian painters have chosen the crucifixion of Jesus as a theme around which to exhibit their artistic skills, as well as their faith. The Dutch artist Rembrandt was no exception. He returned to the scene of Cavalry many times during his career. But what makes one of those depictions stand out from all the rest is the one wherein he painted himself as a face in the crowd, one of the onlookers at the foot of the cross, quietly observing the execution that is taking place.

As we hear the familiar reading of Christ's Passion, we might ask do we find ourselves depicted among any of those individuals who played a role, major or minor, in the death of Jesus---Judas, the High Priest, Simon of Cyrene, Peter, Pilate, the women of Jerusalem? Are there any aspects of my own character, any personality traits or even defects of my own, that I see reflected in those whom St. Luke sets before us in his account of the final days of Jesus? No doubt, if we look hard and honestly enough, each of us may find our own face in the crowd. So, for a few moments, just look at these individuals as somehow being reflections of ourselves, and hope that that recognition will show our need for, and the possibility of, a deeper faith in Jesus Christ.

Judas is a member of Jesus' inner circle, one who had once shared Jesus' vision and hope, but for Judas the dream has died, and now Judas is quite ready to use Jesus for his own advantage. Judas is someone who knows how to get things done; he is also probably the smartest of the apostles. He knows Jesus is going to be killed, and so he figures, quite pragmatically, that he might as well cash in on the inevitable. Judas is the consummate "opportunist," and so for him Jesus becomes a commodity to be exchanged, a product that is dispensable when something better comes along. In meditating upon the character of Judas, we might ask ourselves--"What are the things in my life for which I am willing to make a deal, even to trade myself?" "Can I be bought, and if so, what is my price?" "What sort of things do I call "golden opportunities," and "What kind of deal am I willing to make in order to get them?"

The High Priest represents the official institution of religion, its laws, its rituals. So fixed is he in what he believes, so confident is he in his own orthodoxy, that he misses the revelation breaking in with Jesus before him. For us, too, sometimes the religious values we have inherited can resist the intrusion of the new. At times, our notions about what religion is supposed to be, the certainties we look for faith to

provide, the sense of belonging that membership in the church offers, may cater more to our fears, our insecurities, our prejudices, then to the liberating power of Christ's Gospel. We have to ask ourselves, "Am I just using religion--maybe in ways I don't even recognize, but nonetheless using religion--to buttress and support a way of looking at life that seeks to keep me comfortable in my illusions and immune from any call to growth and change?"

Simon of Cyrene appears as the "innocent bystander," the man pressed into service and made to carry the cross. He wasn't looking for the job; he didn't volunteer; it is something forced upon him. He carries the cross without ever really knowing why. The normal routine of his life is interfered with. Simon reminds us of how much we depend upon those routines in our lives. How do we respond when they are interrupted, when what is beyond our control comes to knock us off our feet? Simon forces us to ask questions like, "What is it like for me when tragedy breaks into my life; when my routine is disturbed?" "What is it like to discover that now I hold a cross, and I can't understand why this is happening to me?" "Will I try to shirk the unwieldy fate that life throws at me, or deal with it as constructively as I can?"

And there is Peter, bragging at the Last Supper that even if all the other disciples should abandon Jesus, he, Peter, would stick by Him till the bitter end. Peter boasts that he is better than the rest, bravest of them all. Yet Peter who likes to strut before his peers, who is always acting so "cocky," when confronted by the palace servants, three times denies that he even knows Jesus. Peter is brought back to his senses when he hears the cock crow. Ironically it is the very barnyard animal, the rooster, whose behavior typifies Peter's conduct that makes Peter realize the emptiness of his words and the shallowness of all his pledges of loyalty. We might reflect to what extent do our own words ring hollow; that our own deeds are late in following our voiced intent; that we promise more than we provide; that we prefer to impress with words more than with performance; that our good intentions just somehow never get translated into action.

Of course, the story would not be complete without the enigmatic figure of Pontius Pilate. Pilate knows Jesus is innocent of the charges brought against Him. But Pilate's need to accommodate the crowd leads him to forget about truth, and in forgetting about the truth, he is willing to live with a lie. Pilate's way of dealing with people is trying always to placate them; he is a "people pleaser." He is overly sensitive to criticism; he seeks constant approval; he tries to read and anticipate other people's needs and reactions. He shifts from one position to position easily, because he is not grounded in anything beyond or within himself, other than the demands of the moment. So, we can ask ourselves, "What is it like when I realize I am frequently

willing to compromise what is right and true for the sake of popularity, prestige, and social standing?" "What is there in me that needs constant reinforcement from people, and that tends to give direction to my life?"

Pilate abdicates his judicial responsibility and turns to the crowd for a decision. Pilate is the quintessential bureaucrat who sees in Jesus someone who is innocent, but also who is trouble, who can cause matters to get out of hand. For Pilate, Jesus is a "nobody;" He is "expendable". For Pilate, it is imperative that Jesus be dealt with, lest a bad report of his administration be sent back to the home office in Rome. We can ask ourselves, "To what extent are the people who work with me and for me expendable, so that their rights, their opportunities, their interests can be sacrificed in order that I look good." "Will I use others, discard them when no longer useful, so that I can get ahead?"

Jesus stops to comfort the women of Jerusalem. They weep for Him but He warns them that a greater disaster awaits their children and grandchildren. He knows that the escalating violence and animosity they feel toward the Romans will lead to a revolt that will result in the destruction of their city. Sadly they are clueless of the consequences of the simmering hate they are already stoking in their hearts. We can ask ourselves what is the inheritance we are bequeathing to our children as a consequence of the unresolved racial and economic injustices in our society, and an unwillingness to deal seriously and effectively with the causes and effects of climate change?

The full Passion Narrative is read every Palm Sunday so that we might locate ourselves somewhere in its retelling—but not just to indict us and to make us feel guilty about ourselves. It is read with the hope that in seeing what we are, or what we are fast in danger of becoming, we might then open ourselves to the transforming and healing grace of the risen Jesus. The Passion is read that we might die to what is of sin, of selfishness, and of spite in us, so that Easter Sunday will be for us more than a matter of chocolate bunnies and jellybeans. Let us pray that our attentive reading of the Passion may help us find our face in the crowd, so that we can be renewed in spirit by the risen Christ.