

Palm Sunday, 2024

(Lial, OSF)

We might say that today is something of an “in your face” liturgy. The face of the prophet having his beard plucked, reeling from buffets and spitting... The face of Jesus, as he appears riding on a donkey, bringing exultant joy to the faces of the welcoming people... The bloody face of Jesus looking into *our* faces and saying something to our hearts and souls.

We have several couplets in our liturgy of this Palm Sunday. There are two parades described in the two Gospels. One parade leads *into* Jerusalem with Jesus being welcomed and proclaimed as the Son of David. The other pictures Jesus *leaving* Jerusalem days later, disgraced and abandoned, on his way to a gruesome death. The Liturgy of the Palms and the Liturgy of the Passion attest to the duality of our human response to God throughout history: sometimes we allow him in, and other times we push him away.

In our Old Testament reading today we see a submissive prophet who speaks for God, but suffers for what he knows. In the Gospel we hear Jesus, not rebelling, not turning back. The words he speaks spring from the truth embedded in his relationship with the Father; there is no defensive arguing or lashing out. Jesus’ words are a handing over: his teachings, his body in the Eucharist, his spirit on the cross. Judas hands him over as well, but refuses to take in that spirit.

The reading from Isaiah speaks of innocence, and Jesus embodies that innocence while walking through the shame and jeering which surround him. This is the major contrast: the gentleness of Jesus, colliding with the human resistance to purity and truth and goodness.

The root meaning of the word “innocence” is not “without guilt” or “guiltless,” but “no harm.” This might be a lens through

which we can watch Jesus while listening to the long narrative of the Passion. He lived and died doing no harm, and more positively, doing the infinitely good thing.

How much ink, paint, marble, and glass have been used to express a theme, or a mood, or a presentation of what it all means? Every Catholic church in the world displays an image of this battered, bloodied Messiah nailed to a cross. Most Catholic churches contain stations which depict the passage of this “parade” out of the city. We keep the memory alive each time we gather for the Eucharist. And we intensify the meaning during this Holy Week which begins with this liturgy.

Each conversation Jesus has, each action of his, each event of denial or betrayal, speaks the same reality. But the apostles, the Jewish leaders, the soldiers—none of them understood who he was for them, what he was doing for them. The apostles slept while he prayed his obedient surrender to the Father’s will. They fled while he remained faithful.

But here is the comfort for us in it all. For all the art and words, we still do not, cannot, fully comprehend the embrace in which the Son of God wants to enfold us with those outstretched arms, pinned on the beam of a cross. We can catch fleeting emotions and ideas about what Jesus’ death means, but we have heard it so often that the embrace can seem more like a handshake or a simple nod. And there is still some sleeping going on within us as we consider being loved so dearly. There is always the possibility and reality of our denials to his invitation to follow him. But the embrace is still there, moving ever closer to us.

So what do we do then? How do we pray through these holy days of our eternal Passover? Many years ago when I was the pastor of a large parish, my associate was presiding at the liturgy of the Lord’s Passion on Good Friday. Since that is the only day

of the year when the Eucharist is not celebrated, I decided not to be in the sanctuary, but to sit among the congregation for the liturgy. I was sitting beside a woman and her 20-something daughter who had Downs Syndrome. As the Passion narrative went on, I could see tears begin to well up in the daughter's eyes. And when the narrator said, "and bowing his head, he handed over his spirit," the girl screamed out "No! No! No! He was so good! No! No! No!" I put my arm around her, and she just sobbed into my shoulder. No one left that church that Good Friday thinking the same way about the Lord's Passion as when they had entered the church an hour earlier. So good indeed.

There is no one way to pray through these days of Holy Week. But I would like to suggest that one of the prayerful ways to receive Jesus' passion and death during these Holy Week days is to consider how we might be at the bedside of a dying friend or loved one. We might want to fetch some water, plump up the pillow, straighten the bed clothing. But in the end, the only thing we do is sit there, hold a nearly lifeless trembling hand, and watch with the eyes of our memory. And the memory may bring us hope.

There is not much we can do with the memories which make up this liturgy and this coming week. Praying might be nothing more than staying "awake" to what is being done, offered and remembered. We know there will be a resurrection, but we also know that we are all invited to join this parade of walking faithfully with our crosses toward our own participation in that same Resurrection.

"Christ became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Phil. 2:8 And we are saved....