



SERMONS THAT WORK

Good Friday

The Identity of the Slain

[RCL] Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10:16-25 or Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42

After listening to the achingly beautiful words of Second Isaiah, to the despair of Psalm 22, and the mournful solemnity of St. John's remembrance of the saddest night in Jesus' and his disciples' lives, we wonder: What more can a sermon add?

The Old Testament lesson comes from the segment that is called Second Isaiah, and the verses from chapters 52 and 53 are known as the Fourth Servant Song. A litany of adjectives stays in the mind from this magnificent Servant Song:

“Wounded.”

“Despised.”

“Rejected.”

“Bruised.”

“Crushed.”

“Oppressed.”

And “afflicted,” among many other descriptions of defeat. No matter who the Suffering Servant was in the mind of the writer/prophet, all of these apply to Jesus of Nazareth after his arrest. It was Jesus himself who took the mantle of the suffering servant upon himself, knowing who he was and knowing what was to come as a result of his being the incarnate Son.

St. John adds more qualities on the torn shoulders of the prisoner: Jesus' great courage when they come to arrest him, and he confronts them. “Whom are you looking for?” and when they answer, “Jesus of

Nazareth,” they can’t believe him, because they are not used to persons who are hunted willing to tell the truth. Jesus answers with the great I AM of the eternal Christ. “I am he.”

This courage is followed by his shining integrity that nothing can compromise; a frightened Pilate before such a defendant asks repeatedly, “Are you a king?” and Jesus answers, “You say that I am.”

Add to that his fierce truth-telling. “Why do you ask?” he demands of Annas when the latter questions him about his teaching. “I have said nothing in secret.”

And near the end of the torturous night when Pilate claims his own authority to have Jesus put to death, the prisoner reveals the terrible knowledge to which he has submitted with humility and utter obedience: “You would have no power over me had it not been given to you from above.”

It is my beloved Father who is allowing this humiliation, he is saying; my God who lets these uncouth soldiers spit on me and strike me. It is the One who loves me who permits them to put the heavy cross on my bleeding shoulders, the means of my terrible death. Knowing all this, he never doubts that his Father loves him. We receive here only a glimpse of the true Suffering Servant—not an imaginary one.

Now let’s look at the others: the ones who think they have power over him; and then at the ones who love him.

We have already seen a frightened Pilate who is worried that this innocent man may have some hidden agenda as a king of another realm. What would Caesar say? What would Caesar do to me if I did the wrong thing? We hear his brain asking questions that reflect on himself alone. Pilate was a Roman; we can say that he didn’t know any better, that he didn’t know of a God of justice and mercy. But Annas knew. He had been the high priest, as his son-in-law Caiaphas was the current high priest. They had been steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures. They claimed the God of Moses and the prophets as their own. They served as both clergy and politicians and, like many similar officials in our world, they had compromised everything they had known about their God in order to do the will of evil men. St. John writes this as an aside, to identify Caiaphas, but this has become throughout eternity the quality of the person who betrays God: “Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people.” Even if they had recognized who Jesus was, they ignored the truth, in order to appease their pagan masters and to secure their own positions and power.

And what of the people, the mob who became inflamed by hatred, even though they had known the love of the one who cured the sick and blessed the poor? How could they have forgotten so soon? For answers, we can only turn to our own time; the supreme hypocrisy is revealed when the accusers bring Jesus to Pilate: “They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover.” Yes, of course. As long as we go to church and show the world that we are good people, we can do whatever we want to others, even put them to death...

Yes. We cringe at such a realization. We read the morning news and weep. But then we remember Peter. Peter who loved his teacher, Peter who had tried to defend him, Peter who had forbidden him from talking about death. Ah, Peter. We see ourselves in you. “One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, ‘Did I not see you in the garden with him?’ Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed.” It was the third time. Peter would never forget what he did because he, together with the other disciples, knew the identity of the arrested Jesus. And, afterward, he spent his life making up for his denial.

What of us? Where do we fall in all these categories of human strength and frailty? How can we approach this holy hour without remembering? The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews reassures us with these words: “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.” With our hearts heavy and our eyes filled with tears, we can only cry: *Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison, Kyrie eleison. Amen.*

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