



Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord April 13, 2014 A

REFLECTIONS ON THE PASSION OF THE LORD

The first reflection is by Fr. Flor McCarthy.

Those who put Christ to death

At the end of World War II an international military tribunal was set up at Nuremberg to try the leading members of the Nazi regime, who were charged with crimes against humanity. These were the men who had made the whole of Europe shiver with fright. Yet they weren't devils incarnate. They were just human beings making evil choices. One observer, on being asked what the accused looked like, replied, "They looked ordinary, like men who had sat up all night in a third-class railway carriage."

The people who put Christ to death were not a uniquely evil bunch of people, acting from the vilest possible motives. They were ordinary people. They belonged to the same human family as we do. In each we glimpse something of ourselves, of our failings, and the need of grace. This may be a troubling kinship but we cannot reject it.

Let us look briefly at the main characters in the Passion Story and the motives out of which they acted.

The Pharisees: *These were austere, religious men, who devoted all their energy to doing good and the study of God's Law. But they were convinced of their own rightness, and history shows that such people are capable of the most appalling evil. Examples: the unconverted Paul, the Crusades, the Inquisition, the torture of suspects by governments, the atrocities of guerrillas....*

Caiphas: *He was perhaps thinking mainly about religious orthodoxy and how easily people get led astray by false messiahs. The Church condemned heretics to burn at the stake, thinking it was doing a service to God.*

Pilate: *He was thinking about his high office and the preservation of law and order at a time of great unrest. He knew that Jesus was innocent, but he feared that trouble would ensue if he did not give the religious leaders what they wanted. No doubt he was also thinking about his own job. Most people know what is right, but they don't always have the courage to do it.*

Judas: *Most likely he was a disillusioned man. But even he came to recognize and condemn the evil he had*

done. He could not live with the killing of an innocent man. Plenty of people today seem to have no such problem. Think of executioners, abortionists, terrorists, death squads. At times we all betray our ideals, if not our friends.

Peter: *Here we have a man who was simply weak and cowardly. Any one of us would probably have denied Jesus in the same circumstances. Peter at least shed tears over his denials. How many of us shed tears over our denials?*

The soldiers: *They were simply carrying out orders. The Nazi leaders made the same excuse. At the Nuremberg trials they tried to convince their accusers that they really were men of good character whose only crime was loyalty. We too are rather good at blaming others for our sins. We refuse to accept responsibility for our cowardly acts and evasions.*

The crowd: *It was a highly emotional occasion. They simply got carried away. They didn't really know what was happening. Do we not often take refuge in the crowd? "Everybody is doing it," we protest.*

But we must not lose sight of the central character in this sordid story, namely, Jesus himself. He shows us that the only way to overcome evil is by good. He loved us to the point of dying for us.

Dark evil sleeps in us all. Holy Week provides us with an opportunity to look at this. Christ will help us to confront the evil that is in ourselves and overcome it. But that's only the negative bit. There is a positive side. He will help us to become instruments of truth, justice, peace, and love in the world.

Reflecting on the first reading and Gospel, Alice Camille writes the following:

First Reading: Isaiah 50:4-7

He opens my ear that I may hear.

The Servant Songs of Isaiah are profiles in courage. Articulate, obedient, long-suffering, resolute, the Servant of Yahweh is the image from Hebrew prophecy that Jesus draws upon in shaping his ministry. The cornerstone of the Servant's strength is the "morning after morning" of attentive listening to God's heart, which informs the rousing word he speaks and the road he walks.

Jesus continually turned aside to pray in his ministry, to rest, be filled, discern, and most of all to listen. In our

attention-deficit culture, genuine listening rarely happens. Careful disciples will want to consider the “morning after morning” example of Isaiah’s Servant.

Gospel: Matthew 26:14-27:66

Tonight your faith in me will be shaken.

All disciples come to this same dark night when our faith in the Lord is shaken. There may be earthquakes and explicit denials, troubling dreams and profitable betrayals. Or we may simply fall asleep when our presence is needful, or run away when called upon to risk a stand. We may join with the crowds and call for Barabbas over Jesus, even shout for the blood of the innocent. We may be the ones who jeer and mock, or simply the ones who say nothing in the face of injustice.

The night when our faith is shaken is the bleakest night our soul can know. But the disciples survive it to become the apostles, turning the shame of desertion into the courage of martyrdom. The only one who is not transformed is the one who condemned himself for his failure, fearing God’s justice and forgetting God’s mercy.

A reflection by Fr. Alfred McBride

Letting the scenes of Matthew’s passion story come alive in our imaginations and echo in our souls reveals our identity with its diverse characters.

Like Mary and Jesus’ women disciples, we follow in compassion, grieving with the mistreated and brutalized, willing to suffer and die with them.

We hear Peter in ourselves when in fear we deny connections with those putting their lives on the line for God’s reign of non-violent love.

Sometimes overwhelmed by depression, like Peter and Zebedee’s sons, we take refuge in sleep rather than keeping watch with a suffering friend.

Appalled, we find Judas lurking in our own hearts, willing to betray someone behind her back for personal gain, while smiling to her face.

Our envious voices are like those of the chief priests and elders undercutting others’ goodness and influence to establish our superiority.

With Pilate’s wife we dream and suffer with the unjustly imprisoned. Like Pilate we give up when our feeble efforts at justice meet resistance, and we declare our innocence.

This gripping drama of goodness and hatred, fidelity and betrayal, courage and cowardly self-protection, brutality and sensitive care, is our story—personal and social.

We can all honestly say in the words of the Latin poet Terence: “I am human; nothing human is foreign to me.”

God is also human with us in Jesus. “Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped.”

Jesus suffers in all who suffer. He is merciful and kind in faithful caregivers and loyal friends.

He knows the anguish of victims of torture, crime, and abuse, and understands the deep alienation experienced by perpetrators.

Jesus is with us not only in the light, but in life at its darkest.

There he cries out with us: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46).

God’s unending, humble, divine love in Jesus embraces each of us in our goodness and our failings.

Prayer: Compassionate God, you are with us in every experience of life. Sustain and transform us with and in Christ as we live, suffer, and die in him. We pray trusting in your love. Amen.

Blessed John XXIII writes:

The secret of my ministry is in that crucifix you see opposite my bed.

It’s there so that I can see it in my first waking moment and before going to sleep.

It’s there, also, so that I can talk to it during the long evening hours.

Look at it. See it as I see it.

Those open arms have been the programme of my pontificate: they say that Christ died for all, for all.

No one is excluded from his love, from his forgiveness.

In this last hour I feel calm and sure that my Lord in his mercy will not reject me.

I’ve done my best to pay homage to truth, justice, charity, and the meek and humble heart of the Gospel.

My time on earth is drawing to a close.

But Christ lives on and the Church continues his work. Souls . . . Souls . . . Save them.

Have a blessed Holy Week,

