



Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion April 17, 2011 A

Reflection on the Passion of the Lord

The following two reflections are 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.

The tracks we leave behind

It's a winter's afternoon and the fields are covered with soft, clean snow. The snow is full of tracks made by birds and animals. On looking closely at those tracks it is possible to identify some of these birds and animals, and even to tell what they are up to.

Most of what you see there is harmless—the tracks of little creatures trying to stay alive in a hostile climate. For instance, you see the scratching of

sparrows in their quest for a worm, and the rooting of rabbits looking for a blade of grass. But then you see a spatter of blood on the snow where a fox or a bird of prey has made a kill.

On a normal day you could cross and re-cross these fields, and you would see nothing of the doings of the birds and animals. Everything would be covered up. But on this day their cover is blown, and all is revealed. Everything is written there in the snow—innocence, fun, resourcefulness, pain, cunning, and red murder.

Something like this can happen in the world of humans. Something happens in the community or in the work-place, and people are forced to take a stand. Suddenly their cover is blown and they appear in their true colours. Some come out well, but others are shown in a very poor light.

The trial and execution of Christ was one of those events which revealed the minds and the hearts of people. Christ was such a transparent innocent person that when he was put on trial, the snow of his innocence fell from heaven and covered the earth. All those who were aboard on that day left clear tracks behind them. All had their cover blown.

It wasn't Christ who was judged on that day. It was his disciples, and especially his accusers and executioners. But it wasn't he who judged them. They judged themselves—by the tracks they left behind. Looking at those tracks, even a child could tell who was for Christ and who was against him on that day.

When we look at those tracks, what do we see? We see some ugly things. We see the hatred and fanaticism of Caiphias and the religious leaders who plotted his death. We see the cold, calculating evil of Judas who betrayed him. We see the weakness of Peter who disowned him. We see the cruelty of Herod who mocked him. We see the cowardice of Pilate who, though he knew he was innocent, signed his death warrant. We see the unthinking hostility of the mob who shouted: "Crucify him! Crucify him!" We see the dutiful obedience of the soldiers who carried out the execution.

But we also see some lovely things. We see the compassion of Veronica who wiped his face. The courage of Simon of Cyrene who helped him carry the cross. The sympathy of the women of Jerusalem who wept for him. And the steadfast loyalty of a little group of friends who stayed with him to the end, among these were his mother and the disciple John.

All of us leave tracks behind us. This week gives us an opportunity to put down our bags and look back at the tracks we are leaving behind us. Are they the tracks of a coward, or a hypocrite, or someone who lives only

for himself/herself? Or are they the tracks of a courageous, generous person, who is not ashamed to call himself/herself a disciple of Jesus.

We will see whether or not we are on the side of Christ in so far as we are on the side of our brothers and sisters, or whether we are against him because we are against our brothers and sisters.

The extent of our virtue is determined, not by what we do in extraordinary circumstances, but by our normal behavior. It is modest, everyday incidents rather than extraordinary ones that most reveal and shape our characters.

However, we must not lose sight of the central character in the Passion Story, namely, Jesus himself. He shows us that the only way to overcome evil is by good. He forgave those who killed him.

And from the depths of his own pain, he reached out to others. He sympathized with the women of Jerusalem, he brought hope to the repentant thief. He thought about his mother and asked John to take care of her. Some people are like sugar cane: even when crushed in the mill, completely squashed, reduced to pulp, all they yield is sweetness.

Have a blessed Holy Week,

Le Paron