

The Holy Spirit Province

NEWSLETTER

22 March 2021



HUMANITY ON SHOW – THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY: **PASSION (PALM) SUNDAY B**

'Were you there when they crucified my Lord?' (Afro-American spiritual)

The Passion of Jesus continues in suffering people until the end of the world. COVID-19 has been particularly brutal. It has destroyed the health of millions of patients and caused the untimely deaths of too many. Millions more have watched their loved ones struggling to breathe, and, all too often, slipping away. It seems that the whole human race has suffered in one way or another. Lockdowns have led to the closure of churches, schools, factories, offices, shops, pubs, and cafes, and a tidal wave of unemployment. The need for social distancing has meant masks and hot spots, shutting of state and national borders, and quarantining returned travellers. Individuals, stuck at home with nowhere to go, have been feeling fearful, lonely and isolated, and, in some instances, have been subject to threats or actual violence from their partners.

While it has been a tragedy for too many, the pandemic has also produced a great deal of good. Governments have given funds to the struggling for their sheer survival. Many Individuals have reached out with acts of care and kindness to the shut-ins and handicapped. I was particularly touched by the news of the 20-year-old university student cooking free meals for hospital workers. And what about the health-care workers themselves? How about their sheer goodness in their round-the-clock care of those with COVID-19? They remind me of Simon of Cyrene helping Jesus to carry his cross, and the truth of the saying, '... love is from God' (1 John 4:7).

From the here and now of our shared suffering, let us go to the there and then of Mark's story of the Passion, as told today. There is much we can learn from his emphasis on the behaviour of the male disciples of Jesus. He has chosen them 'to be sent out to proclaim the message' (3:14) of the coming of the kingdom of God on earth. But Jesus has also chosen them to be 'with him' (3:14), i.e., to be his companions, brothers, friends, and supporters. Well, how do they measure up? How do they stand by Jesus in his last days, as he faces one horror after

another? Mark tells it like it is. They fail Jesus. They let him down – badly, and in letting him down, they let themselves down!

They begin with good intentions. As they are eating the Last Supper, all of a sudden Jesus drops the bombshell, ‘one of you will betray me’ (14:18). At this, they begin to be distressed and say one after another, ‘Surely, not I?’ (14:19). Then, on their way to the Mount of Olives, ‘... Jesus drops a second bombshell when he says, ‘you will all become deserters’ (14:27). Peter protests, ‘Even though all become deserters, I will not.’ The reply of Jesus is blunt, ‘Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.’ Still, Peter insists, ‘Even though I must die with you, I shall not deny you.’ And that’s what they all say (14:27-31).

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus says to his best buddies, Peter, James, and John, ‘I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.’ But when he goes back to them three times for sympathy and understanding, he finds them asleep, leading him to remark, ‘the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak’ (Mk 14:32-38). Meanwhile, ‘Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve’, goes to the Jewish priests and offers to hand over Jesus for money. With an insincere kiss, he betrays Jesus to their guards. Shortly after, the remaining disciples abandon Jesus and scurry off for their lives (14:43-50).

Somehow Peter gets back on track and starts to follow his Leader from a distance. But under questioning by servant-girls of the high priest, he denies that he has been with Jesus, that he has been a follower, and under oath, that he even knows Jesus. Twice a rooster crows. Peter remembers the prediction of Jesus and breaks down in tears (14:66-72).

A proverb states, ‘the way to hell is paved with good intentions!’ His failing disciples find themselves in the haunting hell of their profound guilt, for neglecting, betraying, denying, and deserting Jesus. I once witnessed the shame and sorrow of this in a Good Friday parish drama. Men from the parish took the part of the original disciples. Each introduced himself as ‘I am Peter’, ‘I am Judas’, ‘I am James’, and ‘I am John’, before going on to tell their truth. But their sad and shameful stories were offset by three others, speaking of how they supported Jesus. One began, ‘I am Simon of Cyrene’, the second, ‘I am the Roman Centurion’, and the third, ‘I am Joseph of Arimathea’.

The prophet, Zechariah, has said, 'when they look on the one whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child ...' (12:10). As we see him suffering and dying, how do we feel about any way we may have neglected, betrayed, denied, or deserted Jesus? On the other hand, how have we been his supporters, in everything for which he both lived and died?

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