

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” GOOD FRIDAY

Isaiah 52: 13-53: 12 Hebrews 4: 14-16, 5: 7-9 John 18: 1-19:42

by Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Why do we save the Passion narratives for this week only? Well, it's the liturgically appropriate time for them. Yes, but do we ever read them on our own? Or share them in some small scripture group? —say in November or July? “No,” we respond, “much too somber of a story for July beach reading.” We read though the Passion narratives this week and once Easter comes we put them aside for another year. But the Passion story, as somber as it is, is still the Gospel, still good news for us, in any season or time of the year. This day we read John's Passion narrative. It is very long. The preacher will be tempted to skip the homily. Don't. Today calls for a brief preaching; but it still calls for a preaching.

While Jesus is the one captured, tried and crucified, it is the rest of the humans in the story who fall apart. Peter denies he even knows Jesus; the religious authorities, who should have known better, have handed Jesus over and call for his death; Pilate buckles under pressure, he is described as afraid and wants the matter over with; the soldiers follow orders and execute an innocent man. Meanwhile, those who lack power, the minor players in the drama, are faithful. They are the ones who keep company with Jesus at the foot of the cross.

Today we acknowledge all those seeming powerless ones who keep vigil. There was nothing any of Jesus' faithful followers— his mother, Mary the wife of Clopas, Mary Magdala and the beloved disciple—could do. But they do not leave this dying and tortured man. They stay by him in his last moments. For those of us who: want to solve problems; find solutions for difficult situations; turn a failing business into a profitable one; master a tennis serve; beat a track rival; close a big business deal; graduate at the top of our class; announce on a bumper sticker that we have an honor student in high school, etc.--- the ones standing at the cross are wasting their time in a lost cause. To those who measure their lives by achievement and successful ventures what could be more frustrating? The cause is lost, they can't save him. We are reminded at the cross that ultimately we can't save ourselves either from the real “challenges” to our life and wellbeing—sin and death. The One who can save us is there in defeat, united to all the world's innocent victims and all those who suffer withering deaths.

But nevertheless, the watchers at the foot of the cross must have been a comfort to Jesus. Rather than bear the stares of the indifferent or hateful onlookers, he could look down at those by his side. He is very aware of them and as the dying often are, he expresses concern for the ones he is leaving behind. “Woman behold your son.” And to his disciple, “Behold your mother.” To look down from the cross, as you are dying and see the faces of those who love you—imagine. Don’t you think they were God-sent for him? Don’t you think he saw the comforting faces and felt a little less abandoned and over whelmed?

So, we honor this day those who vigil with the dying; the ones who are God-sent:

- spouses and families of those dying of cancer
- night nurses who take a break from their rounds to just sit with a dying patient
- hospice visitors to the homes of terminally sick people
- family, friends and strangers outside execution chambers
- clergy and church volunteers who bring the sacraments to the sick
- parents of dying children
- third world parents who watch their little ones waste away from malnutrition and inadequate health care

And we see not only these vigilers, we see our God in them. God stood at the foot of the cross that day in those faithful ones. When one comes into the room to sit with a dying person, God enters too—reaches out to hold the hand of the afflicted; soothes their brow with a damp cloth; offers a sip of water; adjusts a pillow; calls the nurse on duty when the need for medication and pain killer arises; brings some home cooked treats; opens a pyx to bless and give communion.

John’s Passion Narrative—in general.

The preacher will note what makes John’s narrative unique. In this gospel the Passion shows Jesus’ “glory.” (12:23) When Jesus is given the wine he says, “It is accomplished.” Jesus’ last words proclaim victory; he has fulfilled the Scriptures; he has done his Father’s will. Jesus is majestic in John’s Passion account. He has God’s power in him and is united to God in an unbreakable bond. John has Jesus carry his own cross; even while going to his death, Jesus is strong--- in control. John eliminates the agony in the garden and spends much of two chapters on Jesus’ encounter with Pilate—earthly power and God’s power meet face to face. “My

kingdom is not here.”

In John’s account, Jesus is priestly; remember that Jesus’ robe is described as

seamless (19: 24), like the high priest’s. Ever notice the crucifixes that depict a tranquil Jesus on the cross? The reality of crucifixion was quite the opposite; but these crucifixes communicate a truth as seen through John’s eyes. Jesus crucified in this gospel is royal and priestly. He is the Son of God and John is showing his glorification. We onlookers can only imitate “doubting Thomas” and say---- even now, before the resurrection appearances, “My Lord and my God.” John’s telling prompts this response in the believing witness standing at the foot of the cross today.

It is the same response we should utter at the bedside of a dying and faithful disciple. When one vigils with the dying and witnesses that one believing and trusting in God to the end--- we know this is more than sheer human determination. For here too the onlooker sees, even in the depleted countenance of the dying, the power of God ----and we too utter, “My Lord and my God.

JUSTICE NOTES

Jesus was a victim of the death penalty. Abolish the death penalty. Certainly preaching about the death penalty would be appropriate today. Your diocesan peace and justice office should be able to get you some information if you need it. Here is a prayer by Sr. Helen Prejean, SCJ you might want to pray it or publish it in your bulletin.

God of Compassion

You let your rain fall on the just and the unjust.

Expand and deepen our hearts so that we may love as You love,
even those among us who have caused the greatest pain by taking a life.

For there is in our land a great cry for vengeance
as we fill up death rows and kill the killers in the name of justice,
in the name of peace.

Jesus, our brother,
You suffered execution at the hands of the state
but you did not let hatred overcome you.

Help us to reach out to victims of violence
so that our enduring love may help them heal.

Holy Spirit of God,

You strengthen us in the struggle for justice.

Help us to work tirelessly for the abolition of state-sanctioned death
and to renew our society in its very heart
so that violence will be no more. Amen.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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