

Palm Sunday 2021

In St John's Gospel, everything revolves around 'the hour': the time appointed for Jesus to go up to Jerusalem to subject himself to death by crucifixion at the hands of sinners.

Recall how at the Wedding Feast in Cana of Galilee at the very beginning of John's Gospel when he performs the first of his seven signs, Jesus initially responds to his mother by protesting and telling her that his 'hour has not yet come. But now, finally, as he tells disciples, the hour has arrived for this conclusion of his earthly ministry. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" Jesus tells them, indicating how his death is not accidental or incidental to the purpose of the Word becoming flesh but, in fact, its intended climax all along and, in fact, as the OT Lesson and Epistle this morning gesture towards, it is the intended climax of God's work with humanity from the very beginning of creation.

And, by extension, Jesus teaches them and us how his death is not an isolated event happening to one solitary man ages ago in a far-flung corner of the world. Rather, it is a moment of consequence and with ramifications for all people in all times and places, revealing the ultimate purpose of our lives too. Jesus tells us today as we prepare to go up to Jerusalem this year to keep the Paschal Feast of Christ's Passover from death to life: "He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also."

In this way, today's Gospel highlights exactly what Friedrich Nietzsche, the chief modern detractor of Christian belief most despised in Christianity. Nietzsche believed that the triumph of Christianity had been a catastrophe in Western Culture, one that had elevated the slavish and resentful values of the weak over the noble, life-affirming and healthy virtues of the strong. He also thought that the Christian promise of heavenly reality had drained the earth of meaning and that the gospel's concern for and confirmation of the great dignity of the frail and meek had poisoned the wellsprings of human nature. Rather than acting as a catalyst to stimulate what is most powerful and creative in us, the Gospel, he believed, can only do the opposite: elevating in value what is most base and to be despised in human nature (our weakness and vulnerability) and, hence, frustrating what is most vital, strong and worth aspiring to.

At issue, for Nietzsche and for us, is the paradox of the Cross brought into focus by today's Gospel reading for Passion Sunday. The Cross is the 'scandal' of 'the foolishness of God' that each one of us, even those of us believe, must reckon with over and over again. After all, it is not immediately clear why the Cross is good news for us and for the world. How can the unspeakably brutal and violent death of one man, even the Son of God, transform everything? How can a human execution on a Roman cross two thousand years at the hands of sinners bring about a New Creation?

But to push the contradiction one step further, today's Gospel also speaks about the intimate association of Christ and his followers, of their unity, their communion. We

are told that we, like Andrew, Philip, and the other disciples, must follow Christ and imitate him; we too must take up our cross in order to do so 'hating our life in this world in order to keep it for eternal life. We must do so that Christ might be seen and known, believed in, and loved. Yet, what does this mean for us? Jesus ended his public ministry, from a human point of view, incomplete failure: abandoned and alone in his abject and undeserved suffering. Does this mean that we should reject all that is positive in this life? Does this mean that Jesus represents a complete reversal of values where suddenly up is down and what seems right and natural is wrong and what is wrong seems right? How do we make sense of this apparent foolishness, this scandal of the Cross?

In truth, we need focused time to contemplate such weighty mysteries which is why, in her wisdom, the Church shifts gears today and moves us collectively into the time of Passiontide as we prepare our hearts and minds for Good Friday. The Cross is a mystery that demands the best of us as we contemplate it, a truth with depths far surpassing description and understanding.

Yet, to start doing so as a jumping-off point, one commentator helpfully suggests that we must approach the Cross by recognizing that in fact the Cross is all about life. This emphasis is described in today's Gospel when Jesus teaches: "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." The Cross is, no doubt, thoroughly inconsistent, evading our intellectual mastery, not allowing us to ever get completely comfortable with what it signifies and means which is why we must constantly reckon with it and wrestle with its meaning. But we cannot begin to grasp its meaning if we fail to recognize that the life and death of the Son of God, the Word made flesh, is actually entirely about the gift of life in the fullest sense, without limit and without end. And so, this commentator writes:

"Jesus is born to live a life without shadow and without limit and to communicate this life to others. If he suffers and dies, he does it willingly, in order to change death, in whatever shape it comes, into an approach to life. Jesus assumes in a practical way all the weaknesses of our finite condition: temptation, hunger, thirst, fatigue, supplication, tears, mourning, the slavery that reduces us to chattel, the cross, the tomb, hell; not because of some masochistic desire for pain (nothing could be more foreign to the way of thinking of the early Church) but in each case to correct and heal our nature, to set free our desires blocked by the multiplicity of needs, to overcome separation and death and through the cross to transform the brokenness of creation into a spring of living water" (Olivier Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 42-43).

What astonishingly good news this is? Jesus assumes all the weakness of our condition in order to heal our nature. His presence in our midst is a healing one, patiently and with power and authority transforming us into the likeness of God's image, glorifying us as he glorified his Son. He goes to the Cross so that we, who live in a world, who live lives, enmeshed in sin and various forms of death, even now by his self-sacrificial, forgiving presence, might be drawn into unity with God and with each other, the communion that is true life.

Jesus, speaking of his glorification of the Cross, tells us today: “Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.”

Come, let us follow him up to Jerusalem so that we might see the Glory of God in the face of the Crucified so that we might find our faith in him strengthened and confirmed this Easter.

Amen.