

The Mind of the Suffering Servant

Isaiah 53 /Mark 11:1-11

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Holy Week begins with Christ being welcomed to Jerusalem by the crowd of Passover pilgrims on Palm Sunday and ends with his bloody trek to the cross on Good Friday. Think of it, in less than one week Jesus went from being the conquering hero to becoming, in Isaiah's words, "the one who had no form or majesty, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him; despised and rejected, a lamb being led to the slaughter."

If Holy Week seems like an out of control roller coaster ride to you, try to imagine what it must have been like for Jesus, who knew exactly what was coming if only because he carefully set the trap for himself even before he stepped foot into Jerusalem.

And yes, you heard me right. Far from being a victim of circumstance, Jesus orchestrated everything that happened to him down to the last detail, from arranging to have a donkey waiting for him to ride into Jerusalem, to making himself available in the Garden of Gethsemane to be arrested, brought to trial and condemned to die.

During this Holy Week we're encouraged to wade through all the twists and turns as the plot unfolds and thickens. At the same time we should especially pay close attention to the motivations, hidden agendas and lapses of moral courage of those who were involved and then admit our complicity and ask to be forgiven.

Some will ask why should we plead guilty to participating in his death when we weren't even there. The answer: because our sins are no different from the sins of those who were there.

Here's what I mean. The disciples showed themselves to be fair weather friends when they deserted, denied and betrayed Jesus when he needed them most. The Pharisees and High Priests, horribly envious and fearful of Jesus' popularity, set out to protect their positions of power by trying to destroy Jesus' reputation but when that didn't work they conspired to kill him. Then there's Pilate the consummate politician who didn't want to get involved in Jewish matters because he cleverly discerned the religious leaders' charge that Jesus was a danger to Rome were unfounded but for the sake of political expediency he condemned Jesus to death anyway. Finally there's the fickle crowd, wanting to crown Jesus one day and crucify him the next.

Having identified the cast of characters, now comes the hard part, making the connection between them and us. First look long and hard at the disciples until you remember how you deserted, denied or betrayed Christ by deserting, denying or betraying a family member, a co-worker or a friend. And then since we're good Presbyterians we can also identify with the scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees. Like us whenever a new idea came along they'd say the same thing we always say when asked to see things differently and make changes, "We've never done that before!" Next we have Pilate, the brutal Roman governor who could wheel and deal with the best of them. How often have you wheeled and dealt, playing one person against the other or making deals that you wouldn't want to be made public? And finally how do we fit into that crowd? Maybe you've enthusiastically cheered someone on until that someone somehow disappointed you because he or she didn't live up to your high and mighty expectations. Or maybe you promised to support someone no matter what until someone else turned and said, "You better not help that person or it'll cost you big time, I'll see to that." So you didn't because it wasn't in your best interest.

It's true, in one way or another we have deserted, denied or betrayed Christ whenever we deserted, denied or betrayed a neighbor. Remember, "Whatever you do to the least of these you also do it to me." (Matthew 25:40)

But we're not finished yet. Exposing the disciples, Pilate's, the High Priests and the crowd's failures and then linking them to us isn't quite enough. There's still one more person to measure ourselves against before Holy Week begins that is Jesus.

Probing the minds of the others is one thing. Probing the mind and motivation of Christ is quite another. Initially it may seem to be an impossible task until you realize we can find everything we need to know about the mind of Christ is already laid out for us in the scriptures.

One of today's readings, from Paul's letter to the Philippians urges all believers to be

"the same mind that was in Christ Jesus
who though he was in the form of God
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited
but instead emptied himself...
and became obedient to the
point of death
even death on a cross.

(Philippians 2:6-8)

Last Sunday we heard the story from John's Gospel about the Greeks who approached Phillip during Holy Week and said, "Sir, we want to see Jesus." They never got to see him because Jesus wasn't interested in exchanging lofty ideas or the newest philosophies because Jesus was getting himself ready to be lifted up on the cross for the sins of the world. In Paul's words Jesus was preparing to finish emptying himself by offering himself up on the cross.

And I say “finish emptying himself” because a case can be made that from the very beginning of his ministry Jesus was already emptying himself whenever he gave himself away to others. There’s a story in Mark’s Gospel about the hemorrhaging woman who dared to touch the hem of his robe so she could be healed. Immediately Jesus said, “Who touched me? I felt power going out from me.”

His statement can only lead us to conclude that whenever Jesus healed someone or exorcized a demon it cost him something. He was drained of needed energy and power.

But it just wasn’t through his miraculous healings that Jesus emptied himself. No matter how tired he ever became Jesus never turned anyone away. What’s more he expended copious amounts of energy every time he stood up to the religious leaders when he could’ve just as easily backed down and walked away. And then this, he never insisted on his own way or claimed executive privilege. Instead he gave up his rights and lowered himself to raise others up. He was a true servant. How did he do it? He knew and trusted in the deepest secret of eternity: real power only comes from surrendering power to make love possible.

During his final temptation in the Garden of Gethsemane it was love that empowered Jesus to submit to his Father’s will and not slip away into the darkness never to be heard from again. Love enabled Jesus to endure his crucifixion, making him alone the master of Good Friday.

Yes, we can learn a lot about ourselves watching Peter, Pilate, Herod and the High Priests stumbling over themselves and each other but it’s essential that we watch and learn from Jesus. Watch and learn not just to applaud his courage but to enter into his mind and take on his character so when you face your next time of trial you can be of the same mind as Christ, so you can follow his example and triumph.

How do you even begin to do this?

Just as St. Paul encouraged us to be of the same mind as Jesus, he also showed us the way.

“I appeal to you...by the mercies of God to present your bodies...as a living sacrifice which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by renewing your minds so you may discern what is the will of God...” (Romans 12:1-2)

Paul invites us to forsake the way of the world and enter into the Paschal Mystery, the mystery of the Lamb of God taking away the sins of the world by following in his footsteps. Just as Jesus offered up his life for you, offer up yourself to him, not as a human sacrifice but as a living sacrifice, a living, breathing manifestation of the presence of God in your home, your work place and your neighborhood.

Then empowered by God's love put yourself out there to do whatever it is God wants you to do by offering up yourself at any given moment for any given purpose. Put yourself out there the same way Jesus put himself out there for goodness sake.

Of course it's only when you're willing to give up any of your preconceived notions and self-centered ways that you can submit to God's will. What was it that Jesus said, "Not my will but thine be done."

Holy Week gives us the opportunity to take time to remember Jesus.

Remember Jesus cleansing the temple so you can clean up and reform your old stale religious beliefs and practices.

Remember Jesus putting himself in harm's way every time he went back into the temple that week to teach and heal under the hateful gaze of the religious leaders so when it's your turn to go into the Lion's Den you'll go willingly because you know you must.

Remember Jesus washing his disciples' feet, reminding you of your need to be humble and willing to serve the other.

Above all remember Jesus' death march to the cross because he knew he had to die before he could be raised up, then allow your old self to be crucified with Jesus so you can be raised up to new life.

Jesus died for us. Now it's our turn to die with him. Don't let him down, and don't let yourself down. Be of the same mind as Christ, offer up yourself to God and then wait for the third day when you will be raised up into the new reality the Kingdom of God where God's will is always done on earth as it is in heaven.