

Thoughts on Today's Passion Narrative

From the Gospel: Matthew 26:1-27:54

Book of Common Prayer pp. 134-137 (*plus vv. 55-66*)

What would you imagine might happen if something perfect and blameless, pure, utterly innocent, and thoroughly good and completely righteous — something from outside our world— was placed one day in its midst? Wouldn't you foresee a grand welcome, a celebration of celebrations, a shared sense of awe, wonder, reverence, deference, and even, dare we say it, worship? Wouldn't such an arrival bring out the very best in us? Would there be one bad word spoken on such a day, one negative thought entertained? Wouldn't political agendas vaporize like fog before sunlight? Would anyone dare to cast even the hint of an aspersion on such an event, even if for no nobler reason than public embarrassment and shame? Would it not be an occasion when men of high degree willingly abase themselves, and the humble and lowly find that precious ray of hope and deliverance for which they had so long waited? Wouldn't such wonderful effects endure not merely for an afternoon, or a day, or a week, but for months and years, and perhaps even... forever?

How, then, under such a circumstance, can we comprehend the opposite of these things coming to pass? After the very briefest of celebrations — the shouts of children, the strewing of palms, the praises of the crowds— how in a world of worlds could pride, gross incivility, envy, betrayal, injustice, cruelty, and even murder not only be present, but be chiefly in control? Was it a mere accident? Perhaps it was a misunderstanding. But if so, if there is an adequate definition for the word “wrong”, how could anyone be so wrong about something?

Scripture offers us some insights into this enigma:

Jn. 1:10-11 He [Jesus, the Word of God] was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not.

Jn. 3:19-20 And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved.

This is the excruciating reality: this world in which we live is a very dark place. And those portions of it that men laud as particularly filled with light — those great institutions that they erect to their own glory— are so often the the home of the blackest forms of evil. For in them the name “God” and everything pertaining to it is hated, and rebellion and discontent foam restlessly, under the cover of religion and virtue, ready to erupt against the truly good, should it appear to threaten their security and position.

Do you see the bizarre dynamic constantly at work in today's Gospel? The pace moves faster and faster as each travesty of justice, each cynical disregard of propriety and fairness, leads to another even worse. It's as if the devil and his hordes just can't hustle the figure of Christ quickly enough to His destruction. It is a story full of compulsion and the abandonment of prin-

ciple. It is a time of testing in which the best of men utterly fail. All masks are off, all disguises are made useless, and the essence of the hearts of men is laid bare.

But Jesus held his peace. In the very eye of this storm of opposition stands the One who has so roused the furor that focuses itself upon Him. But how has He provoked it? Was it rash defiance? Disobedience of the Mosaic Law? Was it lawlessness or crime that merited the rallying of the greatest religious and secular authorities of the day against this one Man?

Many centuries before this a prophet had penned these mysterious words:

He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all... Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin (Isaiah 53: 3-6, 10)

Could it be that God can use the worst that man can possibly do to accomplish the very loftiest of goals on man's behalf? Think of the divine formula for our redemption: we, whom He created and loved, were lost in sin, and possessed no means to free ourselves from it. Since He is our Creator and Judge, our offenses are against Him, personally, in the very profoundest sense. His response? Compelled by love, He obligates Himself to assume the full penalty for our transgression, for we cannot pay it. Its price is eternal destruction. But how will *He* pay it? It must include a sacrificial death that cancels entirely the debt owed by all men for their sins, an impossibility for any other than God Himself. But how will He die? He cannot take His own life. Those among the faithful who love Him would never have moved their hand to do such a thing. He can at no time be culpable for instigating His death by actually provoking it, because He is perfect and without sin. No, His death for sins will be a decided act whose responsibility lies entirely at the feet of its perpetrators. God uses the sin of men to effect their own deliverance. The incomprehensible chaos and disorder of the scene we've just witnessed is the work of men and the invisible forces that compel them, but the "full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world" * that took place is the work of God. God does indeed use man's worst to accomplish His best!

Glory be to His Name forevermore!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

* *Book of Common Prayer, Service of Holy Communion, p. 80*