

Understanding the Passion: A Commentary on Matthew 26:14-27:66

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We have just read about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. As a symbolic gesture of remembrance, we blessed, distributed, and waved palms as part of our liturgical observance of Palm Sunday. The first gospel story read today, tells us that a humble Jewish leader of questionable ancestry attracted a passionate following of people, many of whom longed to hear words of compassion and mercy in a society that was harsh and judgmental.

Jesus enters the holy city in time for the feast of the Passover, a yearly event when thousands of Jews would descend upon the temple to celebrate this special holy day. Riding on a borrowed donkey, surrounded by poor peasants, he is honored with cheering and the waving of branches. He is a Light shining in the darkness, a force of goodness and good news to the poor, the sick, the hungry, and the marginalized.

On the other side of the city, I can imagine Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judaea, making his entrance. Parading on a warhorse, surrounded by soldiers, and feared by many, he proudly lifts his head, demanding respect and obedience. Equipped with sword and suit of armor, he represents Caesar Tiberius, the emperor who claims to be a son of God. This position symbolizes power, wealth, expediency, force, and violence if necessary.

Pilate's job is to keep the peace at all costs and to make sure that the Roman Empire wins out in the end. Those who resist his authority will pay a big price, including life itself. While Pilate represents order and efficiency, he also represents the forces of darkness in a world that sanctions slavery, oppression, and the disregard for the dignity of every human being.

Today's Passion gospel is the story of what happens when the Light of God clashes with the Darkness of the world. The more intense the light becomes, the more apt evil tries to snuff it out. We all know how this passion story will end, but for now, we need to listen carefully, reflecting on what can happen when truth speaks boldly to power. The pain of injustice is a reality of life, even in the 21st century. The passion gospel reminds us that there is evil in the world and that darkness cannot tolerate the light.

This is the same story that happens today when people of power lose their moral compass, choosing self-interest over justice for all people; when people of power believe that the ends justify the means. We see this story being played out in the international arena, including North Korea, China, the Middle East, Africa, and even our own country. That is why the Passion

gospel is timeless and needs to be read frequently in order to bring our awareness to the constant struggle between goodness and self-centeredness, light and dark.

The Passion Gospel (according to Matthew) presents Jesus as the meek king who exercises his kingship by suffering evil rather than retaliating. In this story, he prays instead of attacks. He tells his followers to put away the sword even though it will endanger his life. He refuses to engage in deceitful and dysfunctional conversation with his accusers in order to save his own skin.

This is a spiritual king who has preached the beatitudes in a culture that prefers nationalism and greatness. Just as in his life he modeled compassion, forgiveness, and sacrifice, so also in his death, Jesus modeled the meaning of what it means to be a child of God made in God's image.

There are a few unique features in Matthew's record of the Passion:

1. Matthew is the only evangelist that mentions Judas' suicide. Unable to come to terms with betraying his friend, Judas commits suicide in an act of desperation.
2. In Matthew, a scarlet robe (not a purple one) is placed on Jesus along with a reed in his hand. The robe and reed are symbols of kingship, but in this case, are used to mock the so-called "King of the Jews."
3. Matthew is the only one to mention Pilate washing his hands or the dream that Pilate's wife had. Dreams are important avenues of insight in Matthew's gospel. They are avenues of divine revelation.
4. Matthew's gospel describes an earthquake, a splitting of rocks, and a release of the bodies of faithful Israelites who had previously died.
5. The thief in Matthew's passion story is not repentant and it was a Roman soldier, not a follower of Jesus, who makes the first confession of faith at the cross: "Truly this man was God's Son!"
6. Finally, in this gospel, a guard of soldiers makes sure the tomb is securely sealed so that no one could steal Jesus' body.

So, what does this passion gospel mean to you? On one side of the equation is Jesus, a spiritual leader who blessed the mournful, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers, and was willing to give his life for truth. On the other side of the equation is Pilate, a worldly leader who is committed to making the Roman Empire great, disposing of anyone and anything that gets in the way of this ultimate goal. Today's Passion gospel asks us to decide which leader we will follow.