

Good Friday, 2009

Is 52:13-53:12; Ps 22

Heb 10:16-25; John 18:1-19:42

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ONE DAY, an old man was walking by a stream with his apprentice when he saw a scorpion clinging to a stick. The stick was caught in the stream, held fast in the roots of a tree, but, as the old man watched, the water began to tug at it until it was about to drift free. The old man reached for the stick, seeking to save the scorpion's life, but the apprentice tried to hold him back, saying, "Don't touch it! If you get too near, the scorpion will sting you, and you will die." The old man smiled and gently disengaged the apprentice from his arm. "I know," he said. Then, reaching out his hand, he grasped the twig and moved it to safety, and the scorpion struck, and drained its poison into his hand. The apprentice began to weep. "Why, Sir, did you do this thing? It was the scorpion's nature to sting." The old man replied, "Yes. But it is my nature to help."¹

In the third century, St. Athanasius wrote: "God became human so that we might become divine." It was as if the fallen world were an infant prematurely severed from its mother's womb, gasping for air and with all its organs failing, and Christ came to make of his body a living tether that would bind the two together again. Through Christ, what is of God could flow again into human beings. Through Christ, human beings could draw the nourishment they needed to reach their full stature as children of God (Eph.4:13). But it would only work if Christ could fully embody both natures: the self-giving, life-giving Godhead, and the pure, gentle strength of human beings as we were created to be.

Good Friday is the day that the powers of evil did everything in their power to change and corrupt the nature of God. They wanted a God made in their own image: jealous, judgmental, unforgiving, able to be threatened into conformity with the desires of humankind. That whole long drama which we just read is a series of traps in which Christ is invited to abandon who he is and whose he is, and play by the rules of the world he is seeking to transform. They are the traps which seek to ensnare each one of us from our lives in faith, tempting us to abandon our heritage in God and content ourselves with the bread of short-term comfort and the wine of conformity.

The story begins one verse before the Passion that we read, as Jesus is ending his long, last discourse to the disciples. He has told them that he is going to leave them, that where he is going, they cannot follow. He has commanded them to love one another. He has promised them that his loss will work for their gain, as it will open a path for the sending of the Holy Spirit. He has begged the Father to protect his followers and lead them into the life of God. Finally, he says, "I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them." (John 17:26) As his last gift to themselves and to him, he claims the nature of his life's work: to make God known to people, and to love them in God's name, that they may love one another, and become vessels for the spirit of God. And he pledges to continue to do that work, even now.

Then he goes to the garden, one of his favorite places, and Judas leads the soldiers and the police to him. And Jesus looks at them and asks, "For whom are you looking?" "Jesus of Nazareth," they reply. If this were a comedy, we all know what would happen next. "Jesus who? Sorry, never heard of him. Unless he's that strange guy in the neighbor's garden..." We laugh, but there are times in all our lives when it seems as if our very life depends on denying who we are and how we are called to live in the world. Maybe it's junior high, when a boy is being pressured to drop the art classes he loves and play football instead. Maybe it's your twenties, when everyone else is getting married, and you feel pressured to pick someone who's good enough, rather than a partner who will make your

¹ Told by John Claypool, Source unknown.

heart sing. Or all the times when your employer demands that you take an action you believe to be unethical. Or when you try to give more to the poor, and your friends don't understand why you can't drive a new car like theirs. Or when your agnostic friends or secular colleagues ask if you really believe all that stuff they tell you in church, and you know how awkward it will be if you say, "Yes," or even, "I'm not sure, but I try to live as if I did." The thing about pretending we are someone else is that we lose the person we are. And so Christ does not deny it, but says, "I am he." Twice. He refuses to try to avoid the consequences of the way he has chosen to live.

"Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. Jesus answered, "I have spoken openly to the world....I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them." (John 18:19-21) Again, Jesus is being invited to lie, not, this time, about his identity, but about his life's work. He is being given the opportunity to "tell ...the truth, but tell it slant," bend it to make it malleable, inoffensive, uncondemning. The world whispers, "Success in circuit lies. /Too bright for our infirm Delight/The Truth's superb surprise....The Truth must dazzle gradually/ Or every man be blind---"² If Christ will only stall, soft-peddle, he might have years, yet, to reach more disciples, to feed them the truth little by little, as they can bear it, until they can contain the whole. But Christ knows that lies do not prepare us to receive truth. If he backs down now, if he veers away into the politics of safety, he will be no different from the high priests, making their faith inoffensive in order to placate the Roman authorities, so that the Jews will have at least some freedom to worship their God (not realizing, until the crowds cry it out, that they have made God subject to Caesar). And so Christ takes the riskiest step of all: refusing to speak on his own behalf, he urges them to speak to his disciples instead, the very people who were so spineless that they have fled or denied him in their own hour of temptation. The time for pablum is past; Christ's work is done; the disciples must stand on their own feet, or fall.

The police accuse him of being uncouth: "Is that how you answer the high priest?" (John 18:22) And who among us has not faced this charge? "Don't go to the peace march; it would be unseemly." "Don't spend time with those people; they are not our kind". "You can't afford to ask that question; it might jeopardize your promotion." "You're too radical." "Be nice." "Don't make waves." "Jesus tells us to be patient." (Incidentally, that's a commandment he never gives.) But Christ responds, I tell only the truth. Sometimes the truth is not polite. But it is real. And only what is real is of God.

Then they take him to Pilate. And Pilate asks, "Are you the King of the Jews?" This is the temptation to claim success on others' terms. Pilate, after all, is a politician, a shrewd, skillful, and ambitious man. He can understand why someone might want to hold power in the world; he wants it himself. If Jesus answers "yes," he may well be condemned for it, but he would have earned the respect of his interrogator; Pilate would see them as two of a kind. Instead, Jesus redefines kingship. "My kingdom is not from this world....For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth." (John 18:37) With these words, he utterly rejects Pilate's whole life. He refuses the allure of dominion, even the illusion of common ground, and instead states clearly and simply: I live a different way. Pilate is left bewildered: "What is truth?" he asks, and one senses that he might really want to know, that Jesus' words might have awakened in his ears an echo of his mother's words, from before he was old enough to learn to compromise. And yet, he does not stay to hear whether Christ replies.

Next, they mock him. Many of us can endure pain, suffering, and deprivation with great courage. When they asked Desmond Tutu whether he thought he could win the struggle against Apartheid, he replied, "You have all the power of the state and of force. But we stand with angels and archangels, with thrones and dominions and powers, and with all the strength of Almighty

² Emily Dickinson, "Tell all the truth, but tell it slant."

God.”³ The watching world was inspired. And yet, when we lay all that we have and all that we are naked and vulnerable on the table, spill out our hearts’ passion, and meet only laughter, how many of us will not back down? If we can inspire others in the face of adversity, so be it; but if we are taken for clowns, how hard is it to keep on painting our faces and walking forward? And yet, that is what Christ did. He did not care if the way of God seemed foolish, laughable, silly; it was the way of God.

Finally, Christ is subjected to the appeal of the heart. “Standing near the cross...were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene...and the disciple whom he loved.” (John 19:25-26) If he would just step down from the Cross, he would not have to see them weep. If he would just step down, their mourning would be changed to joy. If he would only decide to live, he could provide for his widowed mother. And yet, while that might fulfill the fifth commandment, Christ knows that that would not fulfill God’s entire will. We walk in the light while we have the light, giving love and joy and sharing what we have while we can. But there comes a time when we must trust even those we love to the care of others; to the hands of God. Christ chooses one final time to accept the limitations he took on in the Incarnation, to be fully human as well as fully God.

You see, the Incarnation could only “work” if Christ could join his humanity perfectly to God, without forsaking either one. Only in this way could human nature be restored. Only in this way could the power of sin be destroyed forever. Christ had to endure all the powers that maim and kill and destroy, and not abandon his own call to embody truth and love. If he had not done it, we would have been trapped in the path of Peter, denying the best that is in us from fear that we, too, might be held to account. If Christ had not done it, we would have been trapped in the path of the crowds, denying their God under political pressure as they shouted with one voice, “We have no King but Caesar!” If Christ had not bowed his head in death, we would have been trapped in the question of Pilate: “What is Truth?”

Look upon Christ this day, and you shall see.

³ Quotation is inexact, as I can’t find the actual wording right now.