

Palm Sunday
Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalm 31:9-16
Philippians 2:5-11
LUKE 22:14-23:56
March 24, 2013

CHRIST THE COMPASSIONATE VISIONARY

Our four Gospels give us four perspectives on Jesus Christ, like four faces on a diamond. In Mark, Jesus is an action hero, criss-crossing the country to liberate people from the shackles of illness and disability and from the limitations put on them by social conventions and prejudices, taking on oppressive and priggish religious and political institutions which try to limit the freedom of the children of God. At the end, in order to liberate people in the most ultimate ways -- from sin and death -- Jesus accepts having *his* freedom totally compromised: arrested, tortured, nailed to a cross without being able to move, and giving his life itself.

In John, Jesus is the truth sent from above, the truth who will make free all who turn to him in faith. Jesus has the calm dignity and intellectual courage to say to the man vested with the power to crucify him, “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth hears my voice.” To which Pontius Pilate, perhaps sardonically and dismissively replies, “What is truth?” *Pilate’s* truth is that *he* has the power to torture and execute the man who claims to *be* the truth, ironically giving Jesus a huge public platform for Jesus’ own claim -- one which will far outlive the power of one mere Roman procurator of a tiny, troublesome province on the fringe of the Empire. Jesus’ final words in John are: “It is finished.” Translation: I have accomplished my mission.

Matthew portrays Jesus as the fulfillment of the long history of the people of Israel, the one who came not to repeal the Law but to fulfill the Law. Jesus became abhorrent to those of his own people and time charged with upholding their own interpretations of the religious law as being binding for all people. Under the Old Testament Law, being hung on a cross was to be accursed and Jesus’ crucifixion validated the opinion of the religious powers-that-be of Jesus’ time that he was a cursed and crushed subversive. But Jesus turned the curse of the cross to him into a blessing for others; because he had died to take away the sins of the world, those who believed in him

could experience new life more fulfilling than any amount of dutiful observance of old rules could make possible.

On Palm Sunday we hear -- and we *read* together -- the Passion Gospel, so-called from the Latin word “to suffer”, so this is the Gospel narrative which tells of the suffering of Christ. We can come to know the truth who makes us free by becoming part of his story -- and by responding to his invitation to let him join us and have him lift up our stories of our own lives. The poignant old hymn asks, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?”, and as we read the story together in our various parts we *are* there. We can almost feel the warmth of the fire in the courtyard where Peter denies Christ, hear the cries of the anguished women of Jerusalem as Jesus walks past them to his death, see the nails get pounded into his hands and his feet, smell the blood and sweat of crucifixion, and taste the bitter sadness of the whole day. We can be actors and actresses inside the whole story, supremely when we say those dreadful words, “Crucify him, crucify him”, which remind us that Christ died for *our* sins, not just because of the actions of other people in another place and time.

But above all this year, as we read aloud and hear St. Luke’s account of Christ’s suffering and death, we can experience Christ the compassionate, Christ the visionary, at his most painful, most vulnerable and also most extraordinary hour. Those who mocked him and those who scoffed at him both, Luke tells us, *demand*ed that he save himself, as if to say that his compassion was false if he did not have compassion for himself, as if to say that his visionary dreams were bogus if they did not have room for his coming down from the cross. “Hah!” we can almost hear them say. “Who are you going to have compassion on now, from the cross, huh? Hah! What wonderful dreams will you share with your followers now, from the cross?”

But Jesus’ scoffers and mockers had made two big mistakes. First, they did not crucify “the man for others” *alone*. Two convicted criminals were within easy earshot of him. One joined the scoffers; the other said, “Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.” And Jesus, the compassionate visionary to the end, replied, “Today you will be with me in paradise.”

The other mistake the mockers and scoffers made was even bigger: *they* stayed within earshot of Jesus too. Close enough to hear Christ’s ultimate act of compassion, words so astonishing, controversial and hard for some of his later followers to accept that some manuscripts of Luke omit them, but which ring true as those of Christ.

Jesus prayed for those who crucified him: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

No one could take away the fact that Christ *is* the way, the truth and the life, no one could take away the fact that Christ *is* the fulfillment of the law and the prophets, no one could take Christ’s freedom away from him and no one could take Christ’s compassion and vision away from him. Not even torture and death could do so.

How much more do freedom, truth, fulfillment and compassion rise up in Christ on Easter -- and can rise up *in us because* of Easter? But that is a story for *next* Sunday, and after, and after, and after. For now, let us “behold the man”: crucified, but undefeated: compassion, freedom, truth and fulfillment exemplified.

Let us pray.

“When I survey the wondrous cross
where the young Prince of Glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.

“Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were an offering far too small;
love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.”

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