

A PALM SUNDAY 2020

One of the readings that we sometimes use here at our Good Friday evening service is taken from a sermon by the great 4th century Archbishop of Constantinople, St Gregory Nazienzen. He ends the sermon by asking his listeners who they are in the Passion narrative that we have just heard, where do they stand? Simon of Cyrene? One of the crucified thieves? Joseph of Arimathea? Nicodemus? Gregory's point is that you have to stand somewhere in this crowd, and no matter where you stand, you're making a statement, and it has consequences. If you see yourself as Simon of Cyrene, there are still people who need help carrying their cross. One of the crucified thieves? Then be honest, own the possibility that you may actually be at fault, be humble, turn your life around. One of the women weeping? Then keep vigil, stay faithful and compassionate, watch and wait for the Lord's coming.

And of course, there are always the voices of derision and denial: in every age, Pilate and Herod and Caiaphas have their enablers, or how else would evil flourish?

Jurgen Moltmann recalls that the Reformers described the kingdom of God as *tectum sub cruce et sub contrario* – the kingdom is hidden beneath the cross and beneath its opposites. Their point was that the kingdom is no less present when we in pain, there is still the possibility of freedom under trial, peace under suffering, power under our weakness, just as the Passion narrative establishes that Lordship still resides in the crucified one. The kingdom is present among us now, hidden under its opposites, and we either make it more present, or we veil its light. And so, just as there are no idle spectators to the suffering of Jesus: so there are no idle spectators to the suffering of our world.

I wrote the other day about the wordless deeds of kindness and compassion that accompanied Jesus on the Way of the Cross. The sheer horror of the narrative tends to draw our attention away from the tenderness of what scripture and tradition have insisted on preserving: Jesus' mother meeting him and accompanying him to the very end; Simon carrying his cross, Veronica wiping his face, women weeping to see him so abused, Joseph of Arimathea pleading for his body, Nicodemus preparing that body for burial. None of them were working from a script: they just made it up on the spot. Not one word of theirs is preserved, but their spontaneous kindness has become our heritage.

What can we do, compelled by charity and the law to stay at home, forbidden to line anyone's way of the cross: to embrace, to carry, to wipe a face, to visit the suffering or even attend a funeral? Are we to believe that kindness has been eliminated, and compassion outlawed? Like Simon and Veronica, Joseph and Nicodemus, we have no script for what we are facing, but we have not exhausted our genius for compassion. It is inconceivable that we have nothing left in our gift or our capacity with which to minister to the suffering Body of Christ.

The great danger that we see being realized all around the world is that when we are hurt or frightened badly enough, we resort to strategies and behaviors that betray everything we once imagined we cared about, and believed in, what we thought we stood for. Goaded on by misinformation and incompetence and denial, we edge closer and closer to this precipice and the temptation to forget who we are at our very core, and - with that - what we desired most deeply for ourselves and our world. And once we cross that threshold, our actions can no longer achieve our deepest longings, will in fact retard or destroy them. They will betray everything we hoped for, and thought that in some measure we were creating, and sometimes the damage will be irreparable. The kingdom is among us still, hidden beneath its opposites, never a territory that can be occupied and defended. but comprising the world of human thought, of feeling and hope, of relationship and behavior.

Some writers have suggested that the passion accounts began as stories written for Christians to read as they actually retraced the steps of Jesus, a sort of early Way of the Cross; certainly they have always required the reader to stand in certain places, to find ourselves somewhere in the map traced by Jesus in his suffering, and to find in the places where we stand truth and judgment. Through these accounts we see the identity of Jesus emerging, and we see our own identities coming to light in his eyes - we are searched and judged by them, because they model to us how Wisdom conducts itself in a world of fear and rage and insecurity.

He regards all of this terrible neediness, this desperate insecurity, these corrosive fears through profoundly serene eyes. He knows himself - and is faithful to what he knows. And you and I are invited to occupy this space where Jesus abides. We have the invitation, we are given the means, we are given the manual and the example, and in our own histories occasionally we have visited and known that deep peace and security that accompanies him even through trial and torture and death. One way or another, we come back here week after week, year after year, and most importantly to the events of today and the days ahead, to remind ourselves of what that looks like, to have that soak into our marrow, and by degrees, to learn its ways.