

Psalm 24 Philippians 2:5-11 St. Matthew 27:1-54

Portraits at the Passion

Someone once asked me why the readings in Holy Week seemed to be out of chronological order. For instance, notice that today, Palm Sunday, the main Gospel lesson is not from the passage concerning the triumphal entry, but rather from the Passion Narrative in St. Matthew's Gospel. Now, this is no mistake. The idea is to help us focus on the Cross and its consequences...in many ways, the Holy Week services are designed to bring us to the foot of the cross so that we might spend the whole week meditating in its shadow...so that we might see our Savior looking down at us in love, as He willingly takes the penalty for our sins upon His sinless Self...so that we might see our own respective portraits present at the Passion. Now, to this end, we will examine today those described in St. Matthew's account to see if perhaps we may identify with one or more of the different groups of people gathered together on that day. And then, once we have looked at our own portraits reflected in theirs, we will turn to look very briefly at the portrait of the One Crucified.

The first portrait we need to look at is that of the Chief Priests. Most of the references we have regarding the chief priests are found in contexts of conflict. The root of this conflict was that they saw in Jesus the destruction of their own sect because He repeatedly challenged them and indicated that He was, in some way, greater than the Temple...that He was greater than that structure that was at the very heart of their existence as a group. At first, their opposition to Him was mild, but it later took a serious turn as the claim and mission of Jesus became clear, and they began to actively plot with others to silence Him and His followers. Now, the interesting thing about these men is that they claimed to

believe in God – and yet their piety went only as deep as political expediency would allow. They were afraid of losing their position and their place in society to such a degree that they were willing to collaborate not only with those of other sects, but also with secular groups and indeed with the Romans themselves. A good example of their upside down morality can be seen in verses 3-10 in their refusal to take back the money they paid Judas Iscariot for his betrayal of Jesus. Look at what they said in verse 6. “It is not lawful (referring to the law of God – or, at least, their interpretation of it) to put them (the 40 pieces of silver paid to Judas by their own hands) into the treasury, because they are the price of blood.” So, in one instance they upheld the law and in another, by their admission, they flagrantly broke it. You see, self-preservation made them blind to the many inconsistencies in their thought and behavior.

Now, is it possible that you too may have silenced the incarnate Word yourself while yet maintaining your own sense of piety for the same reasons...to look good before your peers...to get that business deal through...to protect your own interests...

Then there is Judas Iscariot...a man who had enjoyed tremendous privilege in being part of the Apostolic band and yet whose own apparent love of money led him to sell His Master for a few bits of silver. St. John described him as a thief in his Gospel in the account of the anointing of Jesus’ feet by Mary. What is interesting about this particular story is that Judas’ objection obviously did not match his heart motive. Do you remember what his objection was? He objected to the waste of the expensive ointment used on Jesus’ feet saying that it could have been sold and the money given to the poor. But St. John revealed the true reason behind this seeming piety. “This he said,” St. John wrote, “not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the money box;

and he used to take what was put in it.” All Judas cared about was that the apostolic fund increase so that he could further line his own pocket. You often see this in the lives of those who object to giving to the church or to missions. Their real reason is that they want to keep it all for themselves. You see, covetousness and deceit go hand in hand because they both have the same foundation, namely selfishness...and this selfishness in Judas ultimately came to a climax in his suicide. Rather than allowing his remorse to lead him on to true repentance, his refusal to fess up and change his ways, so to speak, led him to self-termination. You will see this trait in those who will terminate a relationship even with long standing friends, family or even their spouses rather than admit that they were wrong. As such, Judas represents all those who are, in one way or another, uncommitted to others, enjoying the privileges of the relationship, but rarely contributing to the relationship, other than in that which brings self-satisfaction.

Then we have Pontius Pilate, a pathetic picture of a political puppet...always dancing to the tune of whoever was pulling his strings. The Gospels present him as a weak man, willing to forego principle for the sake of expediency, as can be seen in his collaboration in the murder of Jesus out of fear of imperial displeasure should Tiberius Caesar hear of further unrest in the province of Judea. Throughout the trial we see how Pilate tried to avoid personal responsibility by attempting to pass the judgment of Jesus off to the Jews themselves, then to Herod, then by bargaining for His release, and then finally by trying to appear innocent by washing his hands of the sordid affair and yet not doing anything to stop it either. We all know people who constantly attempt to avoid personal responsibility while all the while protesting whatever it is that they personally refuse to

get involved with. But silence or inactivity just doesn't absolve one from guilt and so Pilate is recorded in history as the one under whom Jesus was crucified.

Then we have an interesting character by the name of Barabbas. This man was a bandit of sorts, arrested for homicidal political terrorism and thus regarded as somewhat of a hero by the people, perhaps even the kind of Messiah they were all expecting. This is the type of person who seeks change through political power or simply brut force, but rarely through moral persuasion. But ultimately, Barabbas represents us all as he is presented as the exemplification of the effect of substitutionary atonement. In other words, Jesus died in his place, even though Barabbas was the guilty one and Jesus innocent.

Then we have the crowd itself – the people of Jerusalem. Why were they so fickle and so easily swayed? At the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday they hailed Jesus as the Son of David...now they cried out for His crucifixion. But crowds are usually made up of people who rarely think for themselves and who consequently allow themselves to be led by those whom they think ought to know better. This type of mentality has been the cause of the demise of many Christians who, because they simply did not take the time to get to know Jesus themselves by reading His self revelation in His Word, blindly followed those who led them away from Him to a god of their own making. For this reason, through the centuries many have denied the real, biblical Jesus and embraced a substitute instead, perhaps even unknowingly, simply because they did not take the time to get to know Him themselves. You can fill in the blanks here...I'm sure I do not need to spell it out for you.

And what about the Roman soldiers? Well, in many ways they represent human cruelty and callousness...and although their actions were physical, they are no different from

those who have mocked, scourged and crucified others with their unkind and unwise words. I need not say more...

Then there was Simon of Cyrene...this is an interesting man as he is described in the Gospel according to St. Mark as the father of Alexander and Rufus, indicating that the family, at least, was well known to St. Mark's first century audience. Some think that he may be the Simeon spoken of in Acts 13:1 as both men seem to have been from northern Africa. Unfortunately we cannot say for certain, but as he is mentioned in such familiar terms in St. Mark's Gospel we may deduce that this incident possibly brought him to faith in the Crucified and thus into the fellowship of believers together with his family. As such, we may identify with Simon as one whose life was positively altered through some trial of life thrust upon us by others or even by one of those wonderful curve balls life throws at us from time to time.

We also have two robbers crucified with Jesus...one of whom never repents of his wickedness while the other takes full responsibility for his sins and does repent. Only the latter is given full assurance of a place in Paradise. Which one are you?

And then we have the Centurion...this is the man who was in charge of the execution of the awful proceedings. Now, it was an earthquake...a so-called "natural disaster"...that caused him to make his profound confession. "Truly this was the Son of God!" But don't forget that this same earthquake rent the veil of the Temple in two and yet had no similar effect on the unbelieving 'sons of the kingdom'. You see, it all depends on how you look at things as to how you interpret them and react to them...

But for all the people who were at the cross, the ones who bother me the most are those who were not there. Every time I read the Passion Narratives I always ask, "Where were

His disciples?" We know the women were there...and we know that St. John was there...but where were the rest? Where were the rest? But before we judge them too harshly, let us ask ourselves where we are when things really matter? Where are we in the places our Lord needs us most? Like the 10/40 window, for instance. Where are we when our voices and our actions are needed? Kind of puts things into perspective, doesn't it? Most of us, even the best of us, are cowards at heart...

Now, these are all portraits...snap shots, as it were...of those involved in the Passion of our Lord. If we are honest, we will see our reflection in many if not all of them in one way or another...but there is one portrait given here that we should all study carefully so that we might retrace our own portrait along these lines...and that is the portrait of the one Who sacrificially gave up Himself for us all.

This portrait is displayed before us quite clearly here at our Lord's Table. Here where we see that Jesus was not only an example of humility and patience, as our Collect says...but that He was also One Who loved me before I loved Him...One Who proved that love by bearing my sins...those very sins that nailed Him on that cross...One Who suffered bitter spiritual anguish so that I might be free to exchange my portrait...whatever that portrait might be...that I may be free to exchange it for one in His likeness.

So, dearest beloved brethren, as you come before this Table on which are the elements...the images of His Body broken and His Blood shed for you, ask Him Who is the Master Painter to redraw the lines of your portrait so that your mind might reflect His mind and that your life might mirror His life.