

Friday of the Passion of the Lord

April 6, 2012

It seems to me that lately we have been dragged into many sad stories: stories about men and women at war, deaths in battle but also by accidents, by shootings in homes and on the streets of Seattle. We've been dragged into stories about wounded children. And tonight we come here to listen to yet another story of death, one we have heard many times.

We listen to this story twice each year, on Palm Sunday and on Good Friday. The version we hear on Palm Sunday changes. The one on Good Friday never does. But this story in all its versions can help us face all the other stories that come our way, all those other terrible stories of loss, pain, and grief, both personal and communal.

John's version of the passion that we just heard is different from the others, not so much in the series of events it reports but in the theology underlying it. We are prepared to listen to it by the first two readings chosen for Good Friday. For they are chosen to tell us about Jesus who died on the cross – he is the Suffering Servant that the prophet Isaiah spoke of – the one who would be exalted and raised high but only after great suffering. He is the one who reveals in his suffering and death the face of God.

John gives us the story of Jesus' death as the story of the death of Jesus the King. The royal Jesus who, throughout all he faces in his last hours, remains a noble figure, not the abject Jesus of Mark that we heard of on Palm Sunday. Mark's passion presents Jesus as a failure, betrayed, denied, and deserted at the end, isolated and abandoned by disciples who could not even stay awake, much less at his side. From the cross his final words were a haunting cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

But this Jesus of the Fourth Gospel is calm, controlled, self-contained, kingly. Jesus calmly informs Pilate that his kingdom is not of this world, that his reign is not about domination but truth, and that those who belong to the truth listen to his voice. In this Gospel Jesus crucified is Jesus king.

When we turn toward the cross to venerate it, we do so because of what this story tells us. The cross is the enthronement of Jesus as the King and Lord of all creation. While the cross speaks to us of what happened in the past, once and for all, more importantly, it speaks to us about the present. We are the inheritors of that first community that stood at the foot of the cross: his mother and the Beloved Disciple. John places them at the foot of the cross, where Jesus gives them to each other. Then he utters, "It is finished," and hands over his spirit to the Father and to them.

We come before the cross this night, as his family of today, often in need of his Spirit. And we are reminded that the water and blood that flowed from him continues to flow, as we will witness on Easter when the waters of baptism flow again to increase the family of Jesus (in Sam and Kyle) and the blood of the Lamb once more is presented to us in the Eucharist. We move from the cross to the table to receive communion this day. And this Good Friday, let us be aware of our need to be in communion with our God and with one another. And let us pray that this communion will be a source of strength for all of us.

Paul A. Magnano

Pastor