

Palm Sunday (A)  
(Isaiah 50:4-7 / Matthew 26:14-27:66)  
05.04.2020

Matthew's passion narrative gives much space to the disciples' failures in regard to their Master.

In the Agony in the Garden, Jesus' closest companions – Peter and the sons of Zebedee, James and John – prove themselves incapable of keeping watch with the Lord for one hour. They leave Him to agonise alone, falling asleep repeatedly – and this at the time when Jesus has explicitly solicited their presence, asking them to be near to Him, offering Him the prayer support of which He feels the need.

Further into the story, Peter, the one whom Jesus has chosen, called and established to be the leader of the apostolic corps – Peter who had professed unreserved and unflinching loyalty to the Master on the eve of His Passion – is shown to have wane when put under pressure. Simon, whom Jesus had renamed, *The Rock*, proves to be a rather brittle stone when fear and distress gripped his heart. He breaks completely under the strain. Three times he denies ever having known *the Nazarene*.

As Christian disciples today, I'm pretty sure all of us would have to admit to having been a source of deception to the Lord, to others and to ourselves on multiple occasions.

Who among us has managed to remain faithful to the Lord at all times? Who among us has not been guilty of betrayal in our lives? Who among us has not let another person down – other people down? Who among us has not disappointed himself or herself along life's way? For these reasons, I see Matthew's Passion Narrative to be a Gospel Story that can speak to us. I believe the Passion story just read offers us both a word warning and a message of encouragement.

By way of warning, Paul's admonition to the Corinthians comes to mind: *Let anyone who stands take heed, lest he or she fall*. We would be foolish to imagine that we are above failure; that we could never fall. The Wisdom writer's comment is yet another word of warning to us, when he declares: *Even the just one stumbles and falls seven times a day*.

By way of encouragement – and even more than that, to offer us hope – the early Church kept the memory of the disciples' betrayal of Jesus alive. Not only did the disciples' weakness and failing make its way into the Passion Narratives, it actually became a central motif to the evangelists' accounts of the Jesus story. This bears witness to the fact that the disciples' fragility was used by the Gospel writers as part of their purpose, which was to convey *Good News*: the *Good News* of God's mercy and His compassion in regard to weak humanity.

As we think of outcome of events in the Gospel story, we are encouraged to know that the Lord restored to relationship with Himself those who disappointed Him. In this way, we are reminded that He is always ready to trust us anew when we falter along life's way... no matter how low we fall or to what extent we fail. The Lord's desire is that we be as merciful in our own regard and in each other's regard as the Gospels show Him to have been in regard to those who let Him down.

It has to be supposed that the disciples themselves bore testimony to their weakness; that they confided their story to those who recorded the Gospels as written texts. If anyone other than the principle actors themselves shared the story of their deficiencies with the Gospel writers, these persons must have heard from the disciples themselves an admission to their feebleness and cowardice. This leads us to conclude that the disciples clearly displayed great honesty when they shared their stories. They did not seek to hide their flaws. They did not simply skim over their failings. They did not airbrush their features in any way. The disciples dared

to portray themselves as they really had been in the Passion story as it unfolded – and not as they would have preferred to have been.

Why were the disciples so willing to reveal themselves as having been so fallible? Why did they allow their struggles, difficulties, weaknesses and utter failings to be brought to the fore in the recounting of the Jesus story? Presumably, this was a bid on the disciples' behalf to help others welcome the Good News they were now committed to proclaiming in Jesus' name: the Good News that *Christ came to call sinners*.

If Peter – and/or others close to him – revealed his triple denial of Jesus so readily, we can it that this was not to scandalise the people who would hear the story recounted, but to strengthen those among their number who were likely to flounder as he had done. It is a beautiful and endearing quality in a leader or any person who is greatly revered, looked up to and admired by others, when he or she can admit to their own struggles and weaknesses, daring to acknowledge them to those who look to them for guidance and compassion. Peter's revelation of his own weakness means that he can be pointed to and looked upon as a model for disciples in every age and generation who are led to struggle in one way or another – including those in positions of leadership and, of course, including ourselves. All of us who have failed and fallen in one or other domain of our lives can draw strength from the example of renewed trust in the Lord's merciful love Peter displayed later on in the story on the shores of the Lake in that most beautiful post-resurrection encounter which is recorded for us in John 21.

No wife or husband betrayed by her and his spouse, no lover cheated on by their loved one; no one whose generosity and kindness has been spurned; nobody let down or disappointed by a person whom they regarded to be a friend (especially if that person had promised their fidelity and unconditional support for them in the past), will be indifferent to what they read in today's Passion Narrative. Those who have been betrayed will be able to identify with Christ, just as those who have failed others will be able to identify with the betrayer in the story. I suspect each one of us will all be able to see ourselves on both sides of the equation.

I am pretty sure that we have all been disappointed and hurt at times; as a result we will have been left feeling saddened, betrayed. In this case, we are called to look to Jesus for the strength we need to forgive and move on. I am also fairly confident that, at the same time, we will all be acutely aware of those times when we have disappointed and wounded others, saddened and betrayed people who thought they could count upon us. Often those we will have offended most deeply are the very people whose love for us has been the greatest.

We must all face up to the fact that we are all of us fallible and susceptible creatures. Our great consolation is that our God respects and loves us such as we are. The Lord is there with and for us in our weaknesses. This is what Christ reveals to us from the cross.

The Passion Narratives have for goal to help us trust in God's saving power which is made available to us today and every day of our lives. Opportunities for a conscious expression of trust in God's mercy are continually given to us with the pain and difficulties that come our way as we journey through life. The hurts and betrayals that are part of all our stories – both those which we have endured and those which we have inflicted upon others – are the means whereby God leads us to enter ever more deeply into the mystery of His pardoning love, inviting us to live in total dependence upon His saving grace at work in our broken lives.