

Good Friday

(Is 52:13-53:12 / He 4:14-16; 5:7-9 / Jn 18:1-19:42)

02.04.2021

John's Passion Narrative gives us a rather dramatic, albeit somewhat restrained, presentation of Jesus' Sacred Passion. From the very outset of the story, a certain majesty distinguishes Christ as He stands a lone figure at the centre of events. Just think of the impact His declaration had when He stepped forward and said: *I am He*. The crowd who had come *armed with blazing torches, lanterns and weapons* – a crowd that formed an impressive cohort, *all fell backwards to the ground*.

Just after this initial encounter with those who came to arrest Him, we see how Jesus, who had up until then been surrounded by His disciples in the olive grove of the garden, was left to stand pretty much alone from that moment onwards. We are told how Jesus Himself pleaded with the armed guard that those who were with Him be allowed to go free. His request was granted.

As the Passion Narrative continues we will see how Jesus is progressively alone. Initially, two of the Twelve, Peter and John, were able to follow Him, albeit at a certain distance. Came the point where Peter dropped out of the picture, overcome by fear when confronted and exposed by the maid as a Galilean, one of Jesus' company. From that moment Peter took flight, having denied ever knowing Jesus. John, the Beloved Disciple, drew in a little closer at this stage, along with Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and some other holy woman, but, at the end of the day, in His heart of hearts, Jesus knew that He had to live His hour in complete solitude and so He engaged in a leave-taking even in regard to those who were still beside Him physically. Think of the way He entrusted the Beloved Disciple to His Mother and His Mother to the Beloved Disciple. It is as if Jesus makes it clear to them that they must hold on to one another now, while no longer clinging to Him. The formality of Jesus' words convey the impression that He had already let go of these two beings who were so very dear to Him. Jesus knew that He had to die a solitary death. At the end of the day, all our deaths will be lived, like that of Jesus: alone. We have to prepare for that.

If communion with others had been a hallmark of Jesus' ministry – a communion with others born out of His communion with His Heavenly Father – there came the point, of which Jesus had always been aware, when He simply had to leave others behind to return to the Father. This is made clear in the *Farewell Discourse* of John's Gospel. It is also hinted at in a few places in the Synoptic Gospels in the accounts relating to Jesus' changing rapport with His family and loved ones as His ministry advanced. When it comes to John's Gospel, think of what we read in chapter 13, verse 36. At the threshold of Christ taking leave of this world, He said: *Where I am called to go, you cannot follow me – at least for now, but later on you will*. Or again, consider what the boy Jesus was led to declare to Mary and Joseph, when He was just twelve years of age: *I must be about my Father's business*.

If we are understandably inclined to place a lot of emphasis on the disciples' abandonment of Jesus, I think it is equally important that we recognise that Jesus' being left more and more alone was also part of (at least entered into, was integrated into) God's design for Him. More than that, it became Jesus' own will for Himself.

There are important lessons for all of us in what I have said up to this point.

Among the important lessons given to us is a call to respect our own and other people's solitude, as we live our Christian lives, and allow others to live theirs, responding to our Heavenly Father's call. Our own and other people's solitude has to be respected, without this being understood as necessarily an abandonment or a desolation. Ultimately it is a

requirement. It is a necessity which, at the end of the day, permits each one to realise that he or she is called to live for *God alone*. It happens when some people are dying that they will say to those they love dearly: *Leave me alone now*.

There will be times when we are led to forego human support; times when our own comfort will be found solely in the faith and hope we place in God: *God alone!* In the assurance of His unfailing love!

In all our lives there comes a point where we are led to pray as St Columba did in that very beautiful 7<sup>th</sup> century prayer: *Alone with none but Thee, my God. I journey on life's way*. The solace of others' company has to give way to the comfort which comes from *God alone*. The saintly monk went on to state in his hymn, as he dared to head into his deepening solitude: *What need I fear when Thou art near, O King of night and day? More safe am I within Thy hand than if a host did round me stand*.

Jesus appears to have been alone in His Sacred Passion; quite literally, *terribly alone*. It had to be so. He knew that. This explains why He asked that the others be let go. Solitary suffering was part of the whole painful passage Jesus endured for our sakes. However alone He seems to have been – and, at one level was, there was a certain sense in which Jesus was not alone. Already before His arrest and trial, His Passion and death, Jesus had declared: *I am never alone. The Father is with me always*. That doesn't mean to say that Jesus always *felt* the Father to be near to Him, but He knew it to be true. Jesus knew He was not alone, even when He did not feel the comfort of God's assured presence. The Father was near to Jesus; He was always with His Beloved Son, even when it seemed to Christ Himself that He had been abandoned, by His *Abba-Father*.

In the same way, the Lord will always be near to us, even if it will not always feel that He is present to us.

It was not because Jesus did not feel the Father's proximity that He did not live in it. Likewise, it is not because we are sometimes left wondering if the Lord is near to us that He isn't there. St Augustine tells us that *God is closer to us than we are to ourselves!* Often it is when we feel most alone – at times when we feel as if completely abandoned, not only by others, but even by the Lord Himself – that our *Abba-Father* is near at hand, more present to us than we are to ourselves. Our God is so close to us that we do not, cannot, feel Him by our side. He inhabits our hearts. He lives within us.

Although psalm verses are quoted in the Passion Narratives, one psalm verse that does not figure in any of the texts comes to me as I read John's Passion account. It is one that gives me comfort. Let me share it with you on this Good Friday: *Though I walk in the valley of darkness, You give me comfort. Your crook, Your staff, are there to sustain and uphold me*. I propose that we welcome the assurance those words seek to give to all of us today.

Saint Columba's hymn quoted earlier – a text which has sustained and supported me greatly at difficult times in my life in the past – is another text I would invite you to turn to today. It is a word that you could hold on to.

Some here (others praying with us via the webcam link) may well be feeling very alone at this time. So many human comforts that people counted on have been removed from them, but, as long as we walk the path whereupon God leads us, taking the way He has chosen for us, pursuing the road by which He would have us travel, *we need fear no ill*. He is there with His crook and His staff to give us comfort.

There is no cause for us to allow dread to seize or overcome us. Our present and our future are in God's hands. The Lord holds each one of us by our hand. We need only to trust Him.

We need only only to place our hand in His, as we would place it in the hand of one whom we know really loves us and cares for us and wishes us only well.

In my opening words, I spoke of the Johannine Passion Narrative as being rather dramatic and, as I mediated on the text with you, I drew special attention to the fact that Jesus lived His drama alone... even in the midst of the great crowd around Him. Let me end by saying even more clearly something I have hinted at in what I have shared with you this afternoon. It is that the drama of solitude, the pain of solitary suffering, did not end with Jesus.

It is a great issue in today's world still... perhaps at the present time more than at most other periods in history.

The drama of solitude is experienced by countless men and women and children. It is experienced by the elderly abandoned even by their offspring. It is experienced by widows and widowers and many who have been left forsaken by their spouse – even as they still live their married life under one roof. It is experienced by those who feel themselves to be misunderstood and unheard; those who feel excluded, left without a welcome where they longed to find it – including in the Church! It is felt by migrants and refugees, war orphans, those fleeing persecution. It is the lot of many young people who are victims of a culture that leaves them feeling disabused. The number of people and the many categories of persons who feel alone in this world (and in the Church!) just keeps growing. To be added to those already listed are the many who are caught up in their own selfishness and even in what can appear, at first sight, their glamorous lifestyles. Then there are those whose lives are destroyed by their recourse to violence or to an addiction, and others who are slaves to pleasure and money... riches which can also isolate! Covid-19 has made us all more aware of the pain of solitude so many people are feeling in our world in which social distancing has held people apart: people who just long for contact: people who would want to be and need to be together with others.

In a world where so many are alone, we must hear afresh the call of the Gospel that *we may all be one*. Not alone, but all-one! Let us remember why Jesus experienced the solitary death He endured in His Sacred Passion. It was for us. For you and for me. It was to make us all one. It was *to gather together all God's scattered children*. Let us become more aware of, and more welcoming in regard to, the gift of unity, the gift of communion, Christ wills for us, the gift of truly being together He wishes to see us enjoy as Church, as His *Holy Faithful People*.

Amen!