

Passion Sunday
April 2, 2023
St. Peter's Church, Philadelphia

Full Participants

The liturgies of Holy Week begin today with the dramatic shift in tone which takes us from the singing of “Hosannas” to the jeering of the crowds calling for the death of Jesus. From one spectacle to another. To my knowledge, Christianity is unique in the way in which it invites all of us to participate in such an intimate way, to walk through the final days and hours of Jesus’ journey to the cross and the extraordinary transformation which occurs through the cross. But we are not called to be simply a passive audience to a drama which happened long ago. Rather, we might become genuine actors—not inhabiting a role-- but immersed in our own encounters with the suffering of the world as well as our own thoughts and emotions. Jesus was put to death because he was an outsider. One who challenged the religious authorities and threatened the delicate political balance between the Jews and Rome. In becoming human, God in Jesus became the one who would evoke not just indifference but hate. He associated with sinners; the Samaritans; with women...all those who were “beyond the pale” in terms of the culture of the time. He was killed by the sin of human arrogance and the need to place one person over another, one people or tribe over another. And he was put to death because of fear.

We don’t need to look to the most dramatic and disturbing events of our time and of the past to see how hate and fear combine to bring about destruction. We know how crowds can be fickle; how mobs quickly become violent; how the presence of like-minded cohorts can fuel passion. But we might need look no further than within ourselves. For no matter how “good,” sincere, noble, loving and generous we are, we—at times—cannot escape the consequences of our own hatred and indifference—and of our fear. And even if we remain vigilant to not harming or exploiting others, our very interdependence often means that others suffer as we try to sustain our own sense of security. This does not make us bad, but it does show us as human.

Paul tells the Philippians: *Christ Jesus, though in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be exploited. But Jesus emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.*

Death on a cross. The death of a criminal. The ultimate shame.

Jesus surrenders to the demands of the world. Surrenders to the reality of the hostility of even the good people. To the injustice of it all. In order that God might exalt the faithful one. But “surrender” in this context does not mean submission to defeat. It really means acceptance. Acceptance of the things which seemingly cannot change. As the course of events reached a point of inescapable certainty, Jesus knew that the only way “out was “through.” And all along, he acted with full knowledge of the potential consequences of his actions. He would be opposed for doing what was right.

Let’s be clear about this: Jesus did not die on the cross to appease an angry God. Jesus didn’t “die for our sins” in a nifty little “bait and switch” move to substitute for all the sins of the human race. He did die because of sin: the pervasive and perverse forces of existence which counter God’s blessing of the world. The sin of hate and fear which challenges all of us.

We might understandably harbor our own sense of disappointment of what God seemed to accomplish in Jesus through his relatively brief time in the flesh. Wouldn't we be tempted to feel the rage which sometimes comes when what we have idealized fails us? If the agenda of Jesus was to end the suffering of the human condition, he would seem to have failed miserably. But the suffering is neither the whole nor the end of the story. As Christians, I believe we do not have the choice of evading or minimizing our capacity for violence, or how quickly we dismiss concern for others who are foreign in their ideology, their tribal status or other aspects of the particularity of their lives. But in recognizing our capacity for sin, we can more robustly embrace our need to surrender to the grace of God. We might exploit this grace—use it to achieve something that is truly good in the face of apparent evil. Again and again, as badly as humans can behave, we also can come forward to stand close with the suffering of the world. To not submit to indifference or despair. To surrender our fear as we face the cross. Because paradoxically, it is the only thing that makes sense of all that is senseless.

We are here today not merely as passive observers but as participants. Processing with palms is not merely a corny recreation, but an enactment of our full participation in these events unfolding in the liturgy today. Yet we gather at the table for communion, as the cross of Jesus stands closely by. Bread which is blessed and broken representing a world which is both blessed and broken. Sharing the common cup of the New Covenant in Christ. As Paul might say: Is not our communion a communion in the body of Christ? And is not the body of Christ not only those who gather at the table, but even all those who are seemingly beyond the pale. That's why these events of Holy Week are the intense immersion into what we celebrate every time we have Eucharist. And while God invites us to bring our own personal suffering to the table, we are also called to imagine the discarded bodies and souls of all who suffer—more often than not from the greed, corruption and violence of human beings. To say that the crucifixion is necessary is to say that it so perfectly embodies the senselessness of human violence that only resurrection can bring us back to the right order of things. God does not abandon us, or anyone in God's creation, for it is with our very nature—by virtue of Christ—to be brought from death into life. As helpless as we may feel sometimes, we are not passive bystanders. We are actors in the world who are stirred to be enlivened by the life of Christ who resolutely faced his own mission and destiny as he entered Jerusalem. By virtue of our baptism, we die with Christ that we might live with Christ, and surrender to the hands of the One who brings us to the fullness of life.

The Rev. Dr. Joseph G. Schaller
