

Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday (C)

Lk 23.1-49

There is of course a stark difference between the two stories we've heard this morning. In the first story, Jesus is hailed as a conquering hero, a king who has come to claim his own. In the second story, Jesus is condemned as a criminal, a blasphemer who deserves to die. In the blink of an eye, we go from one extreme to another.

Despite the differences between these stories, there *is* something here that holds them together. There's one little phrase that Jesus utters that applies equally to both stories. That one little phrase is this: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

The people in these two stories thought they knew exactly what they were doing. When Jesus entered Jerusalem riding that donkey, the crowds thought they knew exactly what was going on. "Hail, King Jesus! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" Hey, look at us! Aren't we good and faithful people? Here we are in front of God and everyone, cheering for all that's good and right and true. Hooray for Jesus, and hooray for us. Does that sound cynical? If it does, consider what all these good and faithful people did once Jesus was arrested.

After he's arrested Jesus is put on trial for his life, and once again everybody thought they knew exactly what they were doing. There are the chief priests and the scribes, confident that by manipulating Pilate they can get Jesus out of the way without getting their own hands dirty. There's Pilate, convinced he can use the levers of Roman justice to make sure this mess doesn't get out of hand.

Then there are the people. Remember them? The ones who were shouting, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord?" What are they doing now? "The people stood by, watching." What an indictment! "The people stood by, watching," doing nothing, mesmerized by the spectacle of it all, drawn to the cross like buzzards to a carcass.

"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." They didn't know what they were doing when they were cheering him on, they didn't know what they were doing when they used a miscarriage of justice as a pretense for murder, they didn't know what they were doing when they stood by and watched him die.

We don't like not knowing what we're doing. Not knowing what we're doing feels to us like weakness: it calls into question our intelligence, it calls into question our virtue, and it calls into question our resolve. It undermines the perception we very much want to have of ourselves that we are in control of our lives.

So because we don't like feeling that we don't know what we're doing, we will go to almost any lengths to hide that fact. What's the easiest way to hide the fact that we don't know what we're doing? Look busy; in fact, look *very* busy. The busier you are, the more in control you must be, because how else could you manage the demands of this very busy schedule without knowing exactly what you're doing?

Did you notice how busy everyone is in this morning's gospel? This is a well-oiled machine running at peak efficiency. The Sanhedrin had a procedure for this kind of thing; they know exactly how to deal with someone like Jesus. The Romans had a procedure for this kind of thing; they know exactly how to handle a problem like social and political instability. The centurions probably had a prescribed method for executions: first do this, then do this, then do this. If it's taking too long and you need to move things along, break the legs. The appearance of efficiency is one of the best ways to conceal the fact we don't know what we're doing.

So it's notable, I think, that Jesus doesn't appear at all busy in these stories; he doesn't look at all efficient or in control. In fact, he appears almost entirely passive; people do things to

him, but he does nothing to anyone. His life appears to be totally dominated by the workings of the efficient administrative machine that the Sanhedrin and the Romans use to solve the problem he represents.

He doesn't even bother to defend himself: Pilate questions him and he gives no answer, Herod questions him and he gives no answer, the people call for his death and not once does he protest. Not exactly someone who appears to be in control of the situation.

And yet, he's the only one who knows what's really happening. Not only does he know what *he's* doing, he knows what *everyone else* is doing. So he prays: "Father, forgive them; they don't know." They don't know.

How does he do that? What gave him the ability to act as he did—or maybe it's better to say, "What gave him the ability to *not* act as he did"? What gave him the insight to understand what nobody else seemed to understand, to know better than anyone else what everyone was really doing? What gave him the strength, not just to endure, but to pray for those who were killing him?

The easy answer to that question is to say, "Well, Jesus is divine, so of course he knew what was going on. Of course he knew this is what had to happen, and of course he had the compassion and the grace to be able to pray for those who killed him. Relatively speaking, it was all fairly easy for him; he's God, we're not."

There may be something to that, but that's only half of the story; Jesus was fully divine, but he was also fully human. Earlier in Luke's account of the arrest of Jesus, the gospel writer says Jesus went to the Mount of Olives, and there he prayed to the Father. The first time he prayed he didn't get the answer he wanted, so in "his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood." Luke does not give us an image of a messiah for whom this was all relatively easy; instead, Luke gives us the image of a messiah for whom obedience to the Father was a matter of deep anguish. He was praying so hard, his fear was literally bleeding out of him.

There's another reason we need to ask the question of how Jesus was able to act as he did. If it was only his divinity that enabled him to act as he did, then that doesn't seem to help us very much. What we need is an answer that not only enables us to understand how *he* was able to act as he did, but one that also enables us to understand how *we* might act the same way, with the same commitment and the same obedience even in the face of the same kind of anguish.

The thing that enabled Jesus to act as he did was his ability to see his life, to see *himself* as the place where God's work was being done in the world. He saw himself and he saw his life existing completely within the horizon of God's will for the world. And because he knew that God was more faithful and more powerful than anything in the world, he was able to act by not doing anything at all. All he had to do was be obedient; the Father would take care of the rest. A storm may very well have been raging around him, but he put himself at the calm, still center of that storm, the place where he knew his Father was, and so he was the one who knew exactly what was happening when nobody else did.

Being able to do that was something he had to learn. Long before he faced the cross, long before he was standing before Pilate, long before he'd even entered Jerusalem, he was practicing, exploring and testing what it was God was calling him to do. Long before the Sanhedrin made up their minds, long before Pilate rendered his judgment, Jesus already knew. His whole life was one long series of lessons. But it was also one long series of commitments, little at first but each time getting a little bigger until by the time he had to take the biggest step of all he found that all he had to do was show up and God's will would be done.

That's something we can do, too. That's something that doesn't require us to be divine the way he was divine. When we strive to see ourselves and our lives existing in the horizon of God's work in the world, then we're better able to recognize God's will. When we commit to doing the things God would have us do—even when it sometimes causes up deep anguish—then we learn, as he did, to surrender more and more of ourselves, until we're able to fulfill God's purpose by not doing anything at all, other than simply being who we are. That is the example Jesus gives us, and that is what it means to find our lives in his life.

More than any other time in the church year, the coming week gives us a chance to walk with Jesus as he follows this road. Over the next several days, we can watch and to learn how to surrender more and more of ourselves, how to be faithful by entrusting ourselves entirely to God's mercy and care.

But we can't do that from a distance; we have to get as close to him as we can. We have to sit with him at the table when he celebrates his Last Supper with his disciples. We have to go with him to the Mount of Olives and listen as he prays, and we have to pray with him. We have to stand with him before the Sanhedrin, and before Pilate, and before Herod, and before all the good and faithful people of the world and listen as they call for the death of an innocent man. And we have to go with him to the cross and be with him as he dies.

We have to learn to be so close to him that we find ourselves living *in* him and we find him living in us. That's what this coming week is about. So I invite you, in the name of the church, to the observance of a Holy Week, so that we might find ourselves where he is, and that our lives might be the place where God's work is done in this world, to the honor and glory of his Name. Amen.

14 April 2019
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral
Columbia, SC