

Were You There?

Homily for Good Friday at St. Paul Cathedral 2017

Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42

Most Reverend Joseph J. Tyson, Bishop of Yakima

Peace be with you! Were you there? Were you there when they crucified the Lord? Were you there? Where are you in this Gospel?

Palm Sunday with its powerful distribution of palms would have us be part of the crowd cheering Jesus. But our Passion from St. John invites us to consider that our relationship with Jesus would be more like a bystander, an onlooker or one of the disciples. Were you there?

Are you like Peter? We know that Peter denied Jesus three times. But unique to this Gospel of John is the fact that Peter is directly named as the one cutting off the servant's ear in the Garden of Gethsemane. Are we militantly defensive only to betray?

Are you like Pontius Pilate? Again, we know that Pilate presided over the judgment against Jesus. Yet with the stern give-and-take between Jesus and Pilate, the Gospel of John suggests that Pilate is more on trial than Jesus. Unique to the Gospel of John is the detail that this arrest is planned – not just by the chief priests and scribes – but by Roman soldiers and guards. This would suggest that Pilate must have ordered the arrest of Jesus or – at very least – had advance knowledge of his arrest. It would suggest a kind of collusion between the religious authorities and the civil authorities.

As scripture scholar Father Raymond Brown, P.S.S. noted with sharp directness: “Religious people of all times have accomplished what they wanted through the secular authority acting for its own purposes.” (p. 15 “Crucified Christ in Holy Week”.) Do we look to politicians and judges to enforce what we cannot convincingly witness as Christians? Or are we like the Pilate of St. Matthew's Gospel where we simply wash our hands and thus cover up our past poor decisions?

Are you like the crowds? Last Sunday's Gospel from St. Matthew refers to the crowds as “all the people” (27:25) yet this Gospel from St. John refers to the crowds as “the Jews” and its not meant as a compliment. This Gospel of St. John reference to “the Jews” sounds anti-Semitic to our modern ears.

Indeed, it's wise to note that not only is the crowd “Jewish” but so are the chief priests and Pharisees. So is Peter. So are the women at the foot of Jesus' cross: his mother Mary, his aunt Mary, the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. All the main characters who betray Jesus are “Jews” and all those who loved Jesus also are Jews.

Thus Jesus is not struggling against “the Jews” per se but against a religious attitude. Why? The reason “why” is because Jesus never battles against the sinners. In the

Gospels, sinners always come around to Jesus. No. Jesus battles against the attitudes of the religious leaders who already thought they knew God's will.

That might be something for us to note today. Often it is the most religiously observant and those seemingly "most Catholic" who have most publicly struggled with Pope Francis and his outreach – especially among the world's refugees, immigrants as well as the undocumented. How slow we are to realize that if we want to save the unborn then we must respectfully enter the lives of the undocumented because this is where most of the unborn dwell.

Indeed, reflecting on these Good Friday readings, our emeritus Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI astutely noted: "We must also learn that in addition to the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Church and in the sacraments there is that other, second real presence of Jesus in the least of our brethren, in the downtrodden of this world: he wants us to find him in all of them."

So, no, this challenge of religious attitude is not about "the Jews!" It's about the religious attitudes of all of us – today! It's about the attitudes of those of us who consider ourselves religiously observant.

So where are you? Where am I? Where are we in this Passion from St. John? Can we consider becoming the "beloved disciple?" Unique to the Gospel of St. John, this "beloved disciple" never appears in Matthew, Mark or Luke. But he appears at least four times: He first appears before tonight's Passion Gospel at the "Passover preparations" (13:23-26). He also appears after tonight's Passion, at the empty tomb (20:2-10) and at the appearance of the Risen Jesus (21:7, 20-23). Tonight we hear of the presence of this "beloved disciple" – "the disciple whom he loved" – at the foot of the cross where he receives the commission from the dying Jesus to care for his mother.

Were you there when they crucified the Lord? The answer is "yes"; "yes" we were there then because we are here now. We are there as we reverence and adore the cross of Christ. We are there now at the foot of the cross with the beloved disciple. We are there receiving the same commission: to love Mary as our mother and to love those around us – especially those whose lives reflect the misery of the crucifixion. Yes, we are there. We are there now. Peace be with you.