

“Lift High the Cross”

John 12: 20-33

Passion Sunday B, Boise, 2021

We often refer to this 5th Sunday in Lent as “Passion Sunday.” “Passion,” in the sense we are using the word here, is related to the adjective “passive.” In Our Lord’s suffering and death, He was not acting but, rather, acted upon. Our readings of Scripture today all relate to the Passion, even those that do not mention it. Jeremiah gives us the prophecy of the New Covenant, and covenants, you learned in your reading of Exodus this past week, require sacrifice and the application of blood to ratify and put into force. Moses took half of the blood of the sacrificed beasts and “threw it against the altar.” Then, after reading the Book of the Covenant, which included the Decalogue, he took the other half of the blood and “threw it on the people” [Ex 24: 6-8]. The prophecy of the New Covenant was fulfilled and put into force when Christ offered the Sacrifice of Himself. In our Psalm we sang the petition “Deliver me from blood-guilt, O God, the God of My salvation” [Ps 51: 14a]. Not many believers have shed another’s blood, but we have all murdered in our hearts by our selfish anger — plenty of times. We have forgiveness from those and all other sins we have repented of by the Offering made on the Cross, which was the culmination of the Passion of Our Lord. And our Epistle today, a passage from Hebrews, although it does not mention the Passion outright, speaks of His eternal priesthood after the order of Melchizedek, a priesthood more excellent than that exercised by the sons of Aaron. But there cannot be a priesthood without sacrifice. Christ intercedes for us at His Father’s right hand, on the basis of “His one Oblation of Himself once offered.” In case you have been wondering what “oblation” means, I will tell you that it comes from the Latin word for offering. Archbp. Cranmer, in writing our liturgy, loved to pair Latin and Anglo-Saxon words of the same meaning. Let both the scholar and the working man

understand that the Oblation, or Offering, was made by Our Lord's submitting to His Passion, His allowing horrible things to be done to Him.

We are reminded in Holy Week every year of the false accusations made in the trials before Caiaphas and Pilate, the blows delivered, the scourging, the mocking, and the collapse beneath the weight that Jesus was forced to carry to the place of His death. St Mark, the first to leave a written account, adds to those afflictions the abandonment by even His disciples, causing Him further anguish. The Evangelist St John, in contrast, draws the reader's attention to the Passion's good outcome. He gives us the retrospective view — how the events look after the Resurrection, as a hard battle but also a victorious one. In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus presents His death before it has taken place in this light, even though no one understands Him at the time. "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified," He announces in today's Gospel. Epiphany is a definite Johannine theme. "The Word became flesh, and dwelt [or tabernacled] among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the Only-begotten . . . [Jn 1: 14]. In what events did the disciples see the *kavod* (or glory) emanating from the tabernacle (or tent) of Jesus' body? In the miracles, John says, beginning with the conversion of water into wine. When St Mary made the request, Our Lord's first response was, "Be careful what you ask for, woman; for My hour has not yet come." And so the miracle that followed is a little epiphany, giving those who were in the know a preliminary glimpse of His glory.

When do people get the full revelation? When is the veil of the Holy of Holies drawn back so that the public can see Yahweh's *kavod*, and yet live? During the darkest hour of the story! In Christ's Passion, when horrible things were done to Him!

Now is the judgment of this world! Now will [Satan] the prince of this world be cast out! And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to Myself.

And just in case we're too dense to get that, St John adds parenthetically, "He said this to show what kind of death He was going to die."

But let me not be flippant. It was most likely John's first-, second-, and third-century readers that would have found it difficult to see the Cross as the throne of a resplendent king. The early Christians did not hang crosses on the walls of their house churches or around their necks as adornment. Before the conversion of Constantine, the sight of a cross brought shudders. It was the form of execution reserved for rebels against the Empire, a drawn-out death preceded by scourging, the purpose of which was to expose the miscreant to shame and deter others from following his example.

What St John gives us, then, is a view of the Cross that would be adopted by medieval and modern believers. Having never seen a crucifixion, we are now happy to see a cross. To us it is a visual symbol for the Gospel itself: Jesus died for our sins, thus releasing us from our guilt, and Jesus in dying won His battle with the Devil and his allies, sin and death. "Lift high the Cross." It is our sign of victory, the fruits of which the risen Saviour will share with us at His return, and to a certain extent shares with us now. But try to imagine how Jesus' audience reacted to the announcement that His death, visible for all to see, would *draw* people to Him. Those who heard Him say that could not believe their ears. There is nothing attractive about torture and execution — at least to a normal person. The sight repels. It would have been especially repellent to Jews, who were an outsider group, kept in check mainly by threats. Now here is this Galilean Rabbi telling them that such death would *draw* people from all over. What kind of crazy talk is that?

But Jesus has an explanation. His bruised and torn body, on display above the earth, will signify "the judgment of this world" and His victory over its ruler, Satan. God allowed the Devil to have his way with us when our ancestors joined

him in his rebellion, as a third of the angels had done earlier. He taught mankind to dishonor its Creator and worship idols that represented the powers of nature, things that are part of the creation. The Devil also taught us to dishonor one another, to imitate him and his fellow imps in their cruelty and deceit. Consequently, the judgment of God is against us all. For the purpose of judgment is to dispense justice, to put a stop to the injustice we have been practicing in our dealings with others.

But God had a peculiar way of rendering that judgment to right the wrongs of even those who acknowledge Him. He sent His only natural Son, His Son from eternity, to reside in our wicked world as man, both to show us what true innocence looks like and to make Him, the only innocent One, the victim of all our injustice. We made the Messiah the scapegoat for all our misdeeds, and He, the Lord's Anointed, obeying the Lord's will, took our guilt upon Himself willingly. Thus, as St Paul wrote in Romans, God "condemned sin in the flesh" [Rom 8: 3b]. He condemned it in the human flesh of His eternal Son. By allowing evil Jews and evil Gentiles to act together in putting Jesus on the Cross as the enemy of both Israel and the Empire, God brought His justice against the world that had rebelled against Him and would not cease in its rebellion until He put a stop to it. Hence, in today's Gospel Jesus says, only a week before His death, "now is My soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify Your Name." Right the wrong it has received by mankind's dishonoring of it. Then, after the voice from Heaven affirming that the petition would be answered, that God would glorify His own Name, Jesus announces, "Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out."

That hideous act of injustice, committed against God's wholly innocent Son, was the great reversal. It was God's way of ending the injustice, His way of

defeating the Devil and replacing the rebellious world with the Kingdom, administered by His resurrected Son and all the saints with Him. There have been many attempts, in the works of theologians, to explain why God's redemptive action was a rational one. But the first thing to grasp is the effect itself, the thing that was accomplished. By the unjust execution of God's Son, the misrule of the Devil and his allies came to an end. The Cross, the place of that act of injustice, has now become the sign of victory, a thing of beauty, an object to display proudly. It reminds us of the event that brought us the Kingdom. Now the challenge is to extend that Reign of right in our own lives and to others. God will accomplish that, too, by His Spirit.

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