

St. Thomas's Episcopal Parish  
Newark, DE  
Good Friday – April 14, 2017 Year A  
Isaiah 52:12-53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10:16-25; John 18:1-19:42  
The Reverend Paul W. Gennett, Jr.

+++++

**“In the cross of Christ I glory, towering o’er the wrecks of time,  
All the light of ancient story, gathers round its head sublime.”  
Hymn 441, The Hymnal 1982**

*May my words reveal the greater glory of God.*

AMEN

+++++

*Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?* I wonder what Pontius Pilate might say in response to this haunting question at the end of Mary Oliver’s poem, **The Summer**. This question which has been my companion along this journey through Lent into these three holy days.

Perhaps being sent as governor to this seething hotbed of mixed-up cultures and opposing tribal views, a place of constantly clashing religious practices and pompous prelates leading them. Pilate may have hoped this placement was to make his mark as a true leader of the Roman way, and not just the end of the road where he may just waste away, forgotten by Caesar and Rome altogether.

Keeping **Pax Romana** was never easy throughout the empire. It was doubly intensified during the high holy days of the Jewish Passover. Jerusalem was overflowing with pilgrims, Jewish religious leaders parading about the city filling their coffers for their god, and filling the coffers for Rome as well. **And then along comes this Jesus.**

As our Holy Week journey enters the **Triduum Sacrum, our Three Sacred Days**, we still try to arrive with a **“happy face Jesus”** theological worldview. The joy of Jesus as King on Palm Sunday that is only answered by the greater joy of the risen Jesus as Lord on Easter Day. We do not want to deal with the betrayal, the abandonment, the disgrace, the punishment, and the crucifixion any more that we want to go visit that person who is dying from cancer, or visit the person sitting numbly in the mist of dementia, or the faithful who died in Egypt on Palm Sunday this week. Brian McLaren has named this obsessive death denial of our Western society as **the Christian fool proof evacuation plan for heaven**. A nice life, a quiet and tidy death and viola, the “happy face Jesus” theology incarnated.

We stand in company with those first disciples this Good Friday. They all ran for their lives to escape what was really happening of God’s glory, so unimaginable a glory, so unfathomable a throne.

The truth of our faith as I understand it, is that Good Friday gives power to Easter Day ONLY WHEN we stand before the Cross, with its unimaginable glory. To really hear Pilate's words in our souls this day – *“Ecce homo” ... Behold this man ... Behold YOUR Jesus.*

+++++++

On Good Friday, we come to the Cross with Jesus. For the most part, John's Passion narrative portrays a **large and in-charge Jesus** who debates the theological and sociological issues of the day with the chief priests, the scribes, and Pontius Pilate. But it is the humanity of Jesus that speaks to my heart and soul. I hear his deep, human cry of need from the Cross. On his cross, in the deadly heat of that middle-eastern day.

In John's Gospel, Jesus sets himself squarely over against his accusers and then Pilate. In many ways, I hear the conversation unfolding between them almost as peers in leadership, sharing views on a secular leadership of the world looks like, and a spiritual leadership for a greater presence and power is lived like. Throughout this inquisition turned into teaching by Jesus, Pilate seeks his release, knowing full well the trumped-up charges are only for job security of the pompous prelates and nothing else.

This deep-in-his-heart-and-soul life calling of Jesus was what captured, and confused, the mind of Pilate. His questions reveal his desire to understand this accused Jesus – *“Are you the King of the Jews ... What have you done ... Where are you from ... Why are you here ... What is truth?”* Despite Pilate's own desire not to unjustly judge or condemn Jesus, the wheels of human injustice and cruelty steamrolled over him as the religious leaders pull the ultimate political power card when they say, *“If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor.”* Washing his hands of the whole mess, he hears the crowds who cried *“Hosanna, blessed is the one who comes in the Name of the Lord”* now cry *“Crucify him!”*

Crucifixion was common and horrendously cruel. It was used as a deterrent to maintain order in the empire, the primary form of capital punishment of this time. What we witness some 2000 years later is not the expected outcome of the triumphal entry to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Each of the Gospel's provide such detail around Jesus betrayal, trial, and crucifixion to establish **beyond any doubt** the truth that Jesus did die in this very painful and very public way. Nothing in Hebrew Scriptures would have prepared the disciples to accept a Messiah that would be publicly shamed, cursed, and have his life end in crucifixion. **Christ crucified** was an unimaginable contradiction of the image of **the Messiah** they had expected to be revealed in Jesus.

For this reason, it took centuries of deep and painful debates for the Cross to be embraced as the very center and sum of the Christian faith and life. For this reason, the Cross is our **sign of victory and not defeat**. The victory of the Cross is found in the Letter to the Hebrews – *“I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more. Where there is forgiveness, there is no longer any offering for sin. Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus ... let us approach with a true heart in the full assurance of faith ... Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering.”*

Theologian Hans Kung writes, **“Easter is rightly understood only if the burden and strain of Good Friday are not forgotten. In the crucified Christ, the “weakness” of God is revealed as the staggering power of God to save.”**

+++++++

*Tell me, what will you do with your one wild and precious life?* Over my years coming to the Cross on Good Friday with Jesus along with the pompous prelates and frenzied crowds, the cowering and dispersed disciples, and with Pontius Pilate, I have come to believe that this encounter was **everything** that Pilate needed in his life. However, he could not cross that liminal space into faith of Love’s ultimate presence before him. Pilate turns away from Jesus, giving him over to death on the Cross and hoping to get out of this hellhole that some called **a holy land ...** and he **washes his hands** of the whole bloody mess.

Before leaving the Cross today, come to this first Station of the Cross behind the pulpit. Read the story we just saw and heard for ourselves yet again this Good Friday. Then **wash your hands**, and as you do so, think of how we still, as Christians, wash our hands of the Truth that is before us this day and every day. **The Truth** that we claim as Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, the savior of our souls and of the whole world.

**Wash your hands, and say aloud, “Ecce homo” ... Behold this man ... Behold YOUR Jesus.**

*AMEN*