

“Behold The Man”

John 18:1-19:42

Here is today’s whole story; the Gospel’s long word to us. It is an astonishing combination of the sordid and the sacred. It is the Good Friday Gospel. It is a story of betrayal and persecution that ends in bloody death. It is the story that, in differing forms and versions, will occupy the Church world-wide for the next three days.

To have it all read out at once, in all the detail and pain, may bring home to us that we are called to fix minds and hearts on this story and no other. The Pandemic would draw us away from the Passion story. It tempts us to look instead upon the stories of our own sufferings, to look away from the Cross in order to concentrate upon our humiliations.

All other days we speak of these things. Every other day of the year God gives to us to be concerned with our troubles and weaknesses that he might show to us his power to overcome, his grace to deliver, his hope to recover, his strength to sustain us through it all. This is God’s story for us for all the other days of the year. But the story of our grief is not the story for this day; these next three days. These next three days, our God calls us to fix our whole beings upon the story of the suffering and humiliation of Christ. In the version of it we have just heard, Pilate says of Jesus, “Behold the Man.” That is what we are meant to say. Not, “Behold my grievances, my troubles, the dread and the tragedy that have broken into my life since the last Holy Week.” Not “Behold my private distress that I am not successful enough or rich enough or healthy enough or loved enough.” Not even “Behold the plight of our city and the precariousness of our nation, and of the whole suffering planet.” None of that; not at least for these three days. In these days we are called to behold the Man.

If there is a hazard of focusing on our personal tragedies on the one hand as we approach this story, then on the other hand there is the danger that we may reduce it to a kind of melodrama. When that happens, the principle figures become stock characters, shallow prototypes of one or another obvious human trait. They become one-dimensional, predictable. Their actions are the issue of inevitability. To treat the Holy Week events in that way is to remain distant from them, as though they were going on upon a distant stage; something to be viewed with alarm perhaps, but surely detached alarm. Sometimes the so-called Passion Plays have that result, rendering cosmic drama, in all of its density and subtlety, as though it were conventional theater; something one pays for and looks at and walks away from, back into "real life."

But we are not called to remain outside the Good Friday events at all. We, you and I, are called by God to be drawn into them so that we become part of their saving action. To be drawn into the story is the purpose and meaning of the worship of the Church from Good Friday through Easter Day.

Looked at in one way, this is the purpose and meaning of the whole of the Christian life: to take hold upon, and be taken hold upon by, the story of the sacrificial love of God. Let yourself be taken hold of by the story. Behold the Man!