

Good Friday
March 21, 2008
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

Earlier this week Kristiane asked what work I had to do, and I told her I had to prepare to preach on Good Friday and Easter Sunday. She said, “Oh, are you going to use the same sermon both days?” I thought, “Why would she **think** that?? I **never** use the same sermon twice!” And then I asked her, “Do you **really** think that would be possible, to use the same sermon on Good Friday and Easter Sunday? Don’t you think the tone’s a little different?”

From the mouths of babes.... I went ahead and read Bible commentaries on the Passion according to St. John, and found this sentence, which Kristiane certainly hadn’t read but knew instinctively:

...the crucifixion and resurrection are hardly distinguished [in St. John’s Gospel], so closely bound are they....
(*Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament, John*, p. 267.)

Isn’t that strange? Aren’t crucifixion and resurrection light years apart?? **Who** would mistake one for the other? Isn’t one death and the other life? Isn’t one deepest darkness and the other brilliant light? Isn’t one soul-wrenching sorrow and the other unspeakable joy that only music can begin to express? Is anyone here really looking at the roughhewn cross and wondering if you showed up for an Easter instead of a Good Friday service by mistake? I don’t think so....

It **is** strange to say that the crucifixion and resurrection can barely be distinguished. But you see – St. John **himself** is a bit strange. It’s why his symbol as an evangelist, a writer of one of the Gospels, is the eagle: he’s soaring high above most of the rest of us, delving into theology, speaking in poetry, more interested in eternal truths than historic facts. Remember, the other three evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke are called *Synoptics* because they “see together,”

they have a common perspective, they're a lot alike. St. John is the odd man out. He's the wonderfully different one, who wrote later than all the others, and from a unique perspective.

Last Saturday and Sunday we read together the Passion according to St. Matthew. Did you notice some differences between **that** telling of the story of Jesus' final hours and **this** one that you just heard? The differences are intentional. They all build a case for St. John's claim that **Jesus' crucifixion is not humiliation but exaltation**. It is not a case of Jesus being dragged down by a bunch of low lives, but of Jesus' Father lifting Him up above the earth to draw all people to Himself....

Did you notice there was no agony in the Garden tonight? Jesus' sweat does not become like drops of blood. He is not pleading with His Father to let the cup pass, if that be the Father's will. Earlier in St. John's Gospel Jesus had said to His disciples:

“...what should I say – ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.’ Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it and I will glorify it again.’”
John 12.27-28

In St. John's Gospel, Jesus is very much in control. When the soldiers and temple police arrive, Jesus takes the initiative and asks, “Whom are you looking for?” (John 18.4) When they tell Him, “Jesus of Nazareth,” He announces, “I am he.” (John 18.5) They fall to the ground; He repeats the same question and they give the same answer. Then He says,

“I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go.”
John 18.8

Jesus is giving the orders here, even though He is the one about to be arrested. Peter intervenes by cutting off the ear of the high priest's slave. (The fisherman apparently wasn't too skilled in sword play....) Jesus reprimands him:

“Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?”
John 18.11

The contents of the cup is a blessing to be received, not a burden to be borne.

Jesus is regally processing toward the cross, which is His throne, in St. John's Gospel. He responds nobly when the high priest questions Him, and certainly when Pilate does. He is not diminished by the flogging He receives, nor by the crown of thorns nor the purple robe. Pilate has earthly authority over Jesus but is terrified by Him. Jesus is about to be condemned to death but is calm in His self-assurance. It's ironic but not pathetic that Jesus, who really is royalty, is mocked by Pilate and the soldiers.

Did you notice that Jesus carries His own cross in St. John's Gospel? There is no Simon of Cyrene needed to drag the crossbar through the streets of Jerusalem because the tortured Jesus can't. Again, St. John is more interested in eternal truths than historic facts. This Jesus is headed to His enthronement, His coronation, His exaltation on Calvary. There are no onlookers taunting Jesus with the suggestion that He come off the cross. His death comes mercifully quickly, as in the other Gospels, as if He willed its timing. It does not come, though, until after He utters the words, "I am thirsty" (John 19.28) and then makes the pronouncement, "It is finished" (John 19.30). St. John says,

Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19.30)

As Jesus had said earlier in St. John's Gospel,

"For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again."
John 10.17-18

From beginning to end, Jesus is not on trial in St. John's Gospel. **We** are. He is not the condemned. **We** are. He is not humiliated. **We** are. We are Judas in our betrayals of Who and what is most important to us. We are Peter in our denials of truth, our failure to "commend the faith that is in us." We are the religious leaders when we act as though, "We have no king but Caesar." We are Pilate when we give lipservice to justice and priority to expediency.

We will kneel before the rough-hewn cross, or we will stand and bow our heads, not because our Lord's death was pitiful but because **we** are, in our sinfulness. We will kneel or bow not only in sorrow, but also in adoration, because He died for the likes of us; He died **for** us. In John Donne's poem, *Good Friday, 1613, Riding Westward*, the poet wrote,

...Thou look'st towards me,
O Saviour, as Thou hang'st upon the tree.

St. John lets us know that You reign from that cross, which is the tree of life for us. You look upon us in love, O Lord. We deserve death and You give us life. The crucifixion and resurrection seem worlds apart to us. But they are a seamless garment of salvation to You. We worship You, our King, most highly exalted One. Amen

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