

A Prologue to the Passion

A homily preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.

Palm/Passion Sunday, Year A. March 16, 2008. (Text: the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, according to Matthew)

The proper spot for a preacher to have his say is *after* the gospel. But what we're about to read dramatically is so powerful that I want it to be "the last word" on the Church's theme for this day: the death of Christ for the redemption of the world. My purpose is merely to offer a prologue to the Passion, give you some background, and invite you to think a new way about parts of this familiar story. If we're attentive, we may hear and see things we never noticed before.

For background, let's look first at Judas Iscariot. Judas is a puzzle. When we meet him today, he has spent three years as a member of Jesus' inner circle. Why now, at the holiest season of the Jewish year, does he decide to betray Jesus into the hands of those who hate him? Matthew says Judas asked for money in return for his treachery—but if profit was his motive, he could have asked for more. Thirty pieces of silver was a pittance to those aristocrats. They'd have paid ten times as much.

After Jesus is condemned by the Council, Judas will recognize his mistake and try to give the money back. Did he have a secret plan that went awry? Perhaps he imagined that putting Jesus in the hands of his enemies would move God to send angels storming from the skies to rescue him. Maybe Judas thought he'd planned a trick sure to end in triumph. He might even have expected to be commended. If this is true, when Jesus said at the Last Supper that one of the Twelve would betray him, then the Betrayer himself was honest when he answered, "Surely not I, Rabbi?"—Consider Judas. He has a plan, a plan for God to do things *his* way. But if that isn't betrayal, what is?

After Judas goes away to put his scheme into action, Jesus will take the others out to the Mount of Olives. That's where today's gospel takes up the story. This steep hill lying just east of Jerusalem is not a deserted place at this time of year. Since there is no room for all of them in the Holy City, thousands of Passover pilgrims always camp on the slopes facing the Temple. Their cooking fires are everywhere. People come and go, carrying torches. Jesus and his friends have a favorite spot, a place they've stayed before, near an olive press, called Gethsemane in Aramaic. Here, Jesus will ask the disciples to wait and watch while he prays.

We call this scene "the agony in the Garden." Jesus knows what's expected of him, but he will plead with God to let him sidestep the coming ordeal. Now is his last chance to escape, to thread his way through the camps of pilgrims and get away. But, if he is to flee, he must do so now. Soon it will be too late. Jesus is full of emotion: grief, fear and uncertainty, but also commitment to God. He will pray, "*Father, if it's possible, let this cup pass from me; yet let it be not what I want, but what you want.*" He wants to escape. But even *more* he wants to be faithful. —Consider Christ in Gethsemane. Listen to the Son of God pray for a change of plan, for a deliverance which will not be granted. The Father asks his Son to do his duty. And he will.

Judas knows how to find Gethsemane since he has been there many times. He is going to arrive leading a posse of armed men, probably not soldiers but thugs hired by the high priests. These people don't know what Jesus looks like, and in the flickering torchlight it is difficult to identify anyone. But Judas knows his Master's face very well, and he greets him with a kiss. Maybe by this overt gesture of affection Judas means to say, "Don't worry, Master. I have everything under control." —How many times have we said something like that to the Lord, "I have everything under control; just go along with my plan"?

The disciples run for their lives when Jesus is taken—all but Peter, who has boasted that he will never abandon the Master. Wanting to keep his word, Peter follows Judas' posse to the mansion of the high

priest, where the council of elders are putting Jesus through a brutal interrogation, looking for a pretext to execute him. While Jesus is inside being abused by the so-called “shepherds of Israel,” Peter sits outside with their hirelings and guards, chatting. How can Peter engage in pastimes with these people? Before long, they will identify him as a Galilean by his accent and recognize that he’s an accomplice of Jesus. Then he, whom we earlier heard boast of his loyalty “even unto death,” will three times show himself a coward. He’ll say, *“I have never heard of this man, this Jesus. I don’t know him. What are you talking about?”* In days ahead, his spinelessness will haunt him. —Peter’s shame raises a question for us. How loyal have we been to Jesus? How well do we keep our word?

The high priests and their cronies will decide to turn Jesus over to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, and tell him that Jesus claims to be king of the Jews, a dangerous rival to Caesar. Pilate is a professional. He sees that this prisoner has no armed followers, no partisans, no defenders, and has made no incriminating statements. Under other circumstances he might set him free. But Pilate is a politician first, whose main job is to collect taxes for Rome and keep the peace. Wars are expensive. The high priest and his colleagues are local potentates. Jesus of Nazareth might be no threat to Rome, but Caiaphas and company can make big trouble. For Pilate, Jesus is expendable. He’s innocent of course, but political expediency demands that his accusers be granted their request. Pilate washes his hands of responsibility and yields to their wishes as their paid mob shouts “Crucify him! Crucify him!” In the coming drama, *our* voices will echo their cries. —Have we ever chosen expediency over righteousness? Have we gone along with the crowd, and regretted it later?

Roman soldiers will now take over. They don’t know this man. But the governor has decided he’s a rebel against Rome, and they know exactly how to treat a rebel: humiliate him as much as possible, then take him out and nail him to a cross alongside other enemies of the state.

Let’s not romanticize the circumstances of Jesus death. The scene did not look like a renaissance painting. Crucifixions were routine events; they happened several times a week beside a busy road, just outside a city gate. The execution of Jesus was not special; it was commonplace. Crosses only needed to be tall enough to get victims’ feet off the ground; they died almost at eye level with people passing by. Crucifixion was meant not only to kill the victims but to shame them, so they were crucified nearly naked – a particular humiliation to modest Jews.

At Golgotha we will see Jesus’ mother and her friends come and stand at a distance, watching his degrading death, listening to the taunts of his enemies, and hearing what Matthew says were his last words, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*

We – who are the beneficiaries of his death and know what it means for us – come now to be with them.