

Moving On Down

We are governed by a man who, to all appearances, is profoundly antagonistic to immigrants, who seems to be offended by the poor and desperate, and we are living in times when strongmen and bullies seem to be prevailing on the world stage.

Our economic system is, for the vast majority, wildly out of sync, so badly out of sync that, as the news reported last week, even some billionaires are embarrassed by the extreme inequality in wealth that grows more dire by the day.

And the cherry on these various cakes seems to be the circus of Hollywood celebrities under arrest for using their fortunes to buy coveted seats in some of the nation's most elite universities, for their already enormously over-privileged children.

In the midst of power worship and money worship and ego worship, here comes Jesus, turning our world on its head.

And the question that must be asked is: are you sure this is where you want to be?

Is this the fellow you really want to follow?

These questions aren't new.

They go right back to the very beginning, and Jesus is keenly aware of them, as he prepares his friends for what's coming; as his friends ask themselves the very same question: is this who I want to hitch my star to?

This strange Jesus, who not only talks the talk but walks the walk of this strange life — if you wish to be great, serve the least; if you seek true power, renounce all violence, in order to find real life, be willing to die, even before you die.

And the disciples, like we so often do, miss the point - again and again.

We live in times when Bible waving folks claiming to follow Christ support the barbaric separation of children from parents at our borders; who insist that might makes right and who, to quote one of these fellows, “Donald Trump is authorized by God to use nuclear weapons against North Korea.”

And yet, unlike our social big shots, who press us to move up the corporate, military and social ladder, Jesus moves low, operating at the bottom of the ladder, close to the ground, close to the grave; while the disciples, like we so often do, want to fly high.

They too have the gleam of riches and power and authority over others sparkling in their eyes.

Even as Jesus nears the tomb, his followers can't see what's coming: they are flying too high.

Are we any different?

As our Bishops put it recently:

“In a country still living under the shadow of the lynching tree, we are troubled by the violent forces being released by our nation's political rhetoric.

Americans are turning against their neighbors, particularly those on the margins of society.

They seek to secure their own safety and security at the expense of others.”

Looking out for number one is in every nook and cranny of today’s gospel lesson: Judas the sell-out, Peter the coward, the rest - (except the women) running for their lives.

Jesus sees it coming.

He tries to prepare his friends.

He tries to bring them low enough to understand about being servants rather than rulers.

He warns of the sifting that is coming within the hour; yet, even as Jesus tells them that his fate is to die as a common criminal - they are arguing over who’s the top dog, or making macho, soon to be abandoned claims of loyalty.

When he tells them that hard times are coming, using the metaphors of grabbing your cash and buying a sword -- they don’t hear metaphor – they hear permission!

“Take up the sword?!”

At last!

Victory through violence!

The same thinking that so infects our world today.

And so they respond: "Look! We have two swords!"

And Jesus says: "It is enough."

Not because Jesus supports violence, (because the overwhelming consensus of Biblical scholars say that Jesus is either being ironic, as in:

"Two swords against the power of Rome?"

....."Yes, pure genius!".....or.....)

.....he simply surrenders to the sorry truth that the time for words is over.

And so he says: "It is enough" as if to say, "You're still deaf, you're still blind - it will take my death, and my resurrection, for you to finally see, for you to finally hear."

We gather this Sunday of the Palms, this Sunday of the Passion, to remember that we too are the shouting crowds who love the parade -- we too are the shouting crowds yelling out to crucify him.

Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life, because he brings us face to face with who we really are..... what a shock to catch myself in the mirror yelling:

"Crucify him!"

While so many these days seem to admire the strongman and war and the temporary but ultimately false security of money, Jesus rejects all these things.

The passion of our Lord is a stark reminder that we are each of us the problem, not only as individuals, but the very structures of society that we create and nurture and adore; structures which reward the rich, and punish the poor, and leave those in the middle squeezed and anxious.

Only by getting down low, by setting our sights on service rather than success, by taking the side of the vulnerable stranger rather than seeking the praise of the powerful, only this is the path to real freedom.

Truth be told, there is only one remedy for people like you and me, people who cry out with such enthusiasm:

“Crucify him!”

It is to let go.

Because letting go eliminates rivalry, jealousy, envy and fear.

And while the thought of letting go makes most folks’ skin crawl; it is our most profound destiny.

Today, all of the odd, sometimes maddening teachings of Jesus take on flesh and bone as his way of life finally intersects with the way of the cross:

“unless a seed dies.....”

"unless you lay down your life....."

"unless you take up your cross...."

Jesus invites us not into a life of passive acceptance of injustice or meek submission to the bullies, but into a life that actively resists the powers of domination, not with violence, but by always remembering that the oppressor is also a brother or sister, badly in need of transformation.

Jesus calls us to bear the suffering that often comes when we stand with the least, the lost and the left behind, which is the very definition of love in action, that harsh and dreadful thing.

Ironically, we can't get to that place of faithful non-violence, of patient suffering, until we acknowledge, together, that we too killed Jesus, for only that confession allows us to become the community that stands under his word of forgiveness.

"Father, forgive them, they don't know what they are doing."

We are "them."

"This is my blood, shed for many, for the forgiveness of sins."

We are the "many."

If we can acknowledge this truth, and accept the forgiveness we receive, then perhaps we can forgive those who have hurt us, as individuals, as communities, and as a nation.

Perhaps we can peaceably resist those who play to our worst fears, those carnival barkers in love with the heights, because it is in the

depths, where letting go meets forgiveness, that we encounter the mystery we call God, in which all of creation lives and breathes and has its being.

Today, this coming week, the most profound depths of our faith come into sharp focus.

Let us walk this walk together.

Let us meet our God, as our God hastens to meet us.

+amen