Good Friday March 25, 2016

All Saints’ Church Year C

Isaiah 52:13-53:12 Hebrews 10:16-25

Psalm 22:1-11 John 18:1-19:42

There are many streets in Jerusalem, which make up a path, a journey, referred to as the Via Dolorosa, which means “the sorrowful way.” Pilgrims, from near and far, come to walk the walk of Jesus as he moved from his condemnation by Pilate to his crucifixion and burial.

The journey begins just inside the Lion’s Gate, which is now in the Muslim quarter of Jerusalem and ends at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. This tradition of walking Jesus’ route is almost as old as Christianity itself. When it became safe, after Christianity became the sanctioned religion of the Empire, in the mid 4th century, people flocked from all corners of the Empire, at all times of the year, to honor and to live into the “sorrowful way” of their Lord.

Now, along the route, there are 14 Stations of the Cross, and a common time to walk it is on any Friday of the year at 3:00 in the afternoon, during the hustle and bustle of city life and busy alleyways, usually led by a Franciscan monk. Yet, I found that the best time to take the journey was at 4:00 in the morning, on my own, in the quiet, just before the dawn. Bread shops are just opening, peddlers are beginning to set up their wares, streets are being washed with buckets of water and mops, and two men, Muslims, from the Nuseibeh (Newsaybe) family and the Joudeh (Jowdah) family are walking toward the Church of the Holy Sepulcher to open up the door. Every morning, the opening of one of the holiest places in Christendom, which needs a ladder, a cry announcing the opening to those praying inside and a 12 inch long iron wedge, has been entrusted to these two Muslim families because of the infighting between the different Christian traditions all housed under the roof of the Church of the Sepulcher. So great were the territorial battles, that no one could trust the other and so it was decided to grant the daily act of opening the door to impartial witnesses. These two Muslim families have carried on this tradition, passed on through their families’ generations, since 1187.

My first walk along the Via Dolorosa was when I was in my mid 20s, not much of a Christian, then, like most young people, discouraged and disillusioned by the apparent hypocrisy, and yet I was fascinated by the story, one I knew well enough since I had grown up as a Catholic. But what took me on that walk the first time so early in the morning was not my familiarity with the story, but rather it was my experience of Holy Week in Sicily.

Settimana santa… Holy Week, where the Sicilians in every town on the island reenact their own version of the Via Dolorosa, the sorrowful way, in their own particular way. As cooks all week prepare for the Easter meal…. Roasted lambs, colorful breads, new baby artichokes, lima beans, rosemary, garlic, little potatoes, and sweet candies, the men and women of the local guilds bring out their funeral biers and statues, as processions of all different kinds are being prepared.

I’ve been to many Sicilian towns and I have experienced many different ways of lifting up the agony of our Lord settimana santa, yet the most moving was in the small town of Trapani.

Good Friday in Trapani features Mother Mary. Grief stricken, she is a large, carved, glistening white marble statue, bigger than life, strapped onto a funeral bier shouldered by many men and women, with their arms interlocked. She is in search for her son; frantic in this search, she moves all over the town. Meanwhile there are 14 other statues just as large representing the 14 Stations of the Cross, all carried on different funeral biers by other men and women, and they are spread throughout the town. All of these processions are joined by funeral marching bands and children, under black veils who are carrying torches. It all begins before dawn and lasts throughout the day. Sometimes the men and women carrying the biers take two steps forward and one step back to make the journey even more tortuous. And they often sway to coordinate their burden of weight. The highlight comes when Mother Mary meets one of the fourteen Stations of the Cross. There is wailing and moaning and cries of anguish as Mary cries out for her son, whom she knows is being killed. These processions go on throughout the day, ending finally in the small cathedral, at the tomb, where everyone drops their loads and their burdens and walk home in silence.

There is nothing better than church on the streets.

I am remembering this Trapani Good Friday today, in particular, not only because it is Good Friday, but also because it is March 25th, the usual day, unless it falls during Holy Week, we celebrate the annunciation of Mary by the Angel Gabriel. The Spirit of the Lord has come upon Mary and nine months from today, the period of gestation, December 25th, Jesus, the Christ, will be born.

There is a Sicilian tradition that the branches of the tree that made the crib for Jesus is the same tree that made the cross. The birth and the death are the same. Incarnation and Redemption are not two mysteries but one. We are saved because today in Jesus’ death, we will be able to come alive in our own new Easter birth. Today is the beginning of our salvation, the revelation of the eternal mystery where the Son of God becomes the Son of the Virgin, who becomes the Son on the Cross, who becomes the Son Resurrected. As Gabriel announces to Mary, the coming of Grace, we too will become God’s beloved, because we too will be filled with grace and love.

But today we can’t rush to that grace. We are here at the death of Jesus, invited to ponder how we are the incarnation of Judas, of Peter, of Pontius Pilate, or of Caiaphas.

I can relate to Judas, if I think of him as someone who believes that he knows better than Jesus. All Jesus needs to start the revolution, the rebellion against Rome, is one good strong push. Be manipulative. Bring out some soldiers, force a standoff, and Jesus will finally come to his senses and take his rightful place as Ruler of All. Have I ever pushed someone in a similar situation because of my own impatience, my own sense of what is right, my own stubbornness? Is there anything of Judas in us?

I can relate to Peter if I remember all the times I wished I could be more courageous. I can imagine myself promising to follow Jesus to the grave and then with a silly question by a fire from a servant girl, completely chicken out. Who knows how strong any of our survival instincts would be? I’m surprised that Peter did as much as he did… even to show up outside the gates, hoping to find the courage he so badly desires. Is there anything of Peter in us?

I can relate to Pontius, hoping somehow to please the crowds, shuttling back and forth between his accusers and Jesus. Wringing his hands. Knowing that the verdict is in. How many times have I listened long past the moment when I knew what to do, but was afraid because it was neither easy or the popular thing to act on. And then get cynical and ask a flippant question, “What is Truth,” as if I can blame my own indecisiveness on the vagrancies of the day. Is there anything of Pilate in us?

I can relate to Caiaphas who made the claim that “it is better for one person to die for the people.” Have I been guilty of political expediency? Have I just wished that someone who was making my life miserable would just go away, to be done with him? How many times have I said, “choose the lesser of two evils” as if any evil can be less? Is there anything of Caiaphas in us?[[1]](#footnote-1)

Yes, yes, yes, we are the incarnation of all the above in all of our different ways, but we are also the incarnation of Mary who can stand at the cross and hold Jesus. Anytime we stand with the hurting, the frightened, the broken-hearted we are Mary. Anytime we protect a child from Juarez, listen to a friend’s anger, make a delivery of food to the food pantry, keep vigil at a parent’s death, serve at the altar, pray for others we are standing with Jesus.

God is calling us to this vocation to stand. As Mary receives the spirit of Christ within, we will, too. God doesn’t keep a score card. Yes, we are Judas and Peter and Pilate and Caiaphas, but we are also Mary, blessed to be Mary by the Grace of God.

And it is within us all to be able to stand at the cross. Maybe not the first time round… maybe we fail and fall and run away and scream and give up. “No problem,” says God. “I don’t expect you to be perfect.” Jesus will stand in your stead. But I have made you for myself. And by my love, you, too, will seek me out, cry for me, witness for me, carry me and love me.

Is there anything of Mary in us? Oh yes, for the incarnation of the life of Jesus is within us all.

1. See David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, *Feasting on the Word*, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary,* Year C, Volume 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), pp. 300-302. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)