

Message for Good Friday – April 2, 2021

Matthew 27:27-54

We are now coming to the end of what many of us call Holy Week. It began last Sunday when we remembered Jesus' entry into the Holy City, and since then what happened in the days that followed; the cleansing of the Temple, the Last Supper, the betrayal, and the trial all leading up to what we remember today, the crucifixion. As I thought about all of this during the last while, it occurred to me that in many ways the story of Holy Week resembles a Greek Tragedy.

In a Greek Tragedy, which is a type of play, everything that happens is pre-ordained and the characters have no real choice or control at all, they are merely actors playing their assigned roles. Now quite often this is how many of us tend to think of what happened during that first Holy Week. It all seems to be so pre-ordained, and everything just had to happen the way it did. Jesus for example just *had* to leave Galilee where he was safe and go to Jerusalem despite the dangers posed by the religious authorities. Then Jesus simply *had* to enter the city like a victorious king drawing attention to himself. After the parade, Jesus then just *had* to drive the money changers out of the Temple and so incite the religious authorities to a murderous fury. And as for the authorities? They simply *had* to arrest Jesus and seek his death, while Judas for his part simply *had* to betray him. Quite naturally too, the disciples *had* to run away, while poor Peter simply had no choice when he denied ever knowing Jesus three times. And as for Pilate, he had absolutely no choice at all either and simply *had* to be a moral coward and wash his hands of the whole matter, sentencing Jesus to death. And turning back to Jesus himself? He of course had no choice and he simply *had* to die on the cross like a common criminal forsaken by all. As I said earlier, this is the way in which we usually think of the events of that first Holy Week. It was like a Greek Tragedy, but was this really the case?

I don't think so; indeed by insisting on the inevitability of it all we reduce Jesus, Judas, Peter, Pilate and all the others to being nothing more than characters in a play playing their assigned parts. If we do this we lose sight of their humanity and even the reality of what happened. The truth is that what

happened during that first Holy Week, including what we remember today, was *not* inevitable. Rather what happened was a result of choices and decisions. Jesus for example did not *have* to go to Jerusalem and could have chosen to stay in Galilee where he was safe. Even when he arrived at Jerusalem, Jesus could have chosen to enter the city quietly instead of riding in in triumph drawing all sorts of attention to himself. And while the religious authorities were fed up with Jesus, they did not *have* to seek his death; they chose to. And it is the same with all the others. Judas didn't *have* to betray Jesus, he chose to. The disciples didn't *have* to run away, they decided to. Peter did not *have* to deny knowing Jesus, he chose to. Pilate did not *have* to sentence Jesus to death, he chose to. To return to Jesus, he freely chose to die on the cross and, as the scriptures tell us, that was not an easy decision. If we deny Jesus and all the other participants in that first Holy Week freedom of choice, then we deny their humanity and reduce them to being nothing more than robots. Yes, Jesus' death on the cross was a part of God's great plan of salvation but even so, there was nothing inevitable about it; what happened was also due to human choice and decision. And so it is with us and our lives too.

Contrary to what we may sometimes think or assume, our lives are not like Greek Tragedies where everything is pre-ordained. In his infinite wisdom God has created us as human beings and part of being human is the ability to make moral choices. One author writing years ago about that first Palm Sunday put it this way:

"If the man in Jerusalem had treated the disciples who came for the donkey as we often treat God's calls for help, the conversation might have been:

'Here, what are you doing with that colt?'

'The Lord has need of it.'

'What do I care? I need it myself.'

That is rough language. We would never put our refusals of God's demands in such blunt terms. But there is no doubt about the refusal.

God needs our time. 'Sorry, but my time is limited. Besides, it's mine.'

God needs our strength. 'Sorry, I can't take on a single thing more. I'm almost exhausted as it is.'

God needs our mind. ‘Sorry, but I have all I can give my attention to and more. I have troubles enough of my own to think about.’
What sort of priority does God get with us?”

What sort of priority does God and other people get with us? Or perhaps we should ask, what priority do we *choose* to give God and others? Sometimes God and others are our number one priority. We may not feel like worshipping, praying, giving, going to that meeting, making that phone call or visit, but we do. Yet while God and others are sometimes our first priority, how often are they our second, third, fourth, or perhaps even last? To return to the events that we remembered this past week, do we ever act like Judas saying that we love Jesus, all the while betraying him and everything that he ever taught and stands for? Do we ever act like Peter and are so afraid and so uncertain, lacking the courage of our convictions? Do we ever act like the religious authorities and are full of anger or perhaps even hate? Or what about Pilate; have we ever acted like him? We see something wrong in the world around us but wash our hands of it all, reasoning that it’s not our fault or our responsibility?

Sometimes in life’s journey we make the wrong choices and yet the good news and promise of what we remember today is that we can be forgiven. It doesn’t matter what bad choices we’ve made or how mixed up our values and priorities have been. It doesn’t matter because Jesus was crucified for our spiritual healing, or as Peter wrote, “He himself bore our sins on his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.” Forgiveness and salvation, restoration and a new beginning are always ours for the asking. They are simply because of what Jesus freely *chose* to do that first Holy Week so long ago.