

Lenten Meditations

2010

All Saints' Episcopal Church

March 29, 2010

Being anointed by Mary in the village of Bethany begins one of the last of Jesus' public acts—those occurring during the final days of his life here on earth. The acts or ministries after these are considered "private," as they were intended for his disciples. And after his death and resurrection, his spiritual ministries begin.

Lent, for many years, was a time for me to concentrate on the finality of Jesus' life, with an "obligatory" self denial of something which was usually included in my daily life (generally something edible or potable). Because of my chosen profession, I also concentrated many times on the human physiology of the horrible suffering and agony of our Lord's final hours.

As many of you know, I have always been very involved in the music department of my church, and I found sorrow and much depth in the many Lenten offerings of both the great and the obscure composers. Two particular musical events come to my mind when I think of Lent. The first was a moment I experienced while singing Lotti's "Crucifixus" from the balcony of our cathedral on Good Friday. It is composed on that part of our creed which states that "he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, suffered death and was buried." The music was so beautifully performed, the space so wonderful, and the sound so extraordinary, that at the end, with tears in my eyes, I felt that I was indeed transported to and had witnessed that terrible event. The second moment was the chanting of the passion gospel, also on Good Friday evening, when I was chosen to chant the part of Jesus. What a marvelous experience to sing, in solo, and concentrate solely on those actual words leading up to death hanging on a cross.

But the Lenten event which will never be surpassed was the passing of my beloved mother on Ash Wednesday. During many days of anticipation of some very risky cardiac surgery, she busied herself calling family and friends to tell them the news of her health, and to let them know how much she loved them, and how grateful she was to have had them in her life. She was admitted to the hospital on the day prior to surgery, and late in that evening, her minister brought her holy communion. I don't know what was said during that time as these were her "private" conversations. Some of her last words to me, however, included the insightful "Don't worry, Sweetheart, no matter what happens, I'll win."

I had prepared her continuously for the fact that I would be at the organ for the Ash Wednesday evening service (the Chenaults were leaving town for a recital), and that I would see her right after surgery, but if she wasn't quite alert after the anesthesia, not to worry, I would be right back. Her answer to me was, "Take your time, and play like I know you can. They need you, too." The surgery was indeed too risky and too extensive for her heart to bear, and at three o'clock in the afternoon, I held her hand, talked to her (knowing that she could hear me even in a nonconscious state), and kissed her forehead as she took her last breaths. Too many times, I have been the one who has pronounced death in my career as a physician; however, it did not come close to preparing me for the experience of having to do this for a parent.

After leaving the hospital, and after several stops and phone calls, it was time to be at church. Geoffrey and Noelle were there to support and comfort me, and to make sure I was up for playing the service. For me, there was no question—Mother had told me to play. At the appointed time, I began the Bach chorale prelude "I Call to Thee, Lord Jesus Christ." I don't remember concentrating so much on the music, but thinking more about playing it for my

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mother. I think it stands out in my mind as a perfect playing of that composition. I truly don't recall much else about that service, except that everything I played—the hymns, the anthem, et al.—I played for her. For those of you who were fortunate enough to know her, you know that she was the typical mother—one who reveled in the accomplishments of her child—and we know she would have been beaming if she had been there.

That Lent of 2007, I did indeed give back to God something very significant to me; however, the spiritual revitalization that I received was and will be lifelong. Just as Jesus' followers mourned his earthly passing and the end of his earthly works; they, too, were the recipients of his spiritual ministries after his resurrection. I continue to be the beneficiary of Mother's sweet spirit, and good works here on earth, and try to live my life in the kind and generous way that she taught me by example. Her grace, her courage in adversity, and her deep and unfailing faith in our Lord are goals to which I aspire. In the traditional Lenten giving up (or back) to help us prepare for the resurrection of our Lord, I can truly say that I now more fully understand what this means, and how this may prepare us for the true pleasures which are reserved for the followers of Christ.

During this season, you may hear me play the Bach chorale prelude mentioned above at one of the many meaningful All Saints' Lenten services. I hope I can play it for you in a perfect state, and I hope that we, in spirit or in person, can join each other in joy, or maybe in sorrow, in celebrating the lives of those members of the Church victorious who continue to speak to us spiritually. And then, when the final note is released, may we all look to the happiness and delight of Easter morning.

Michael Crowe, MD

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March 30, 2010

"Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

Don't we all?

That's my response when the Greeks ask Philip, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." The formality of this request when contrasted with so many of the other approaches to Jesus is almost laughable. Think of it: usually when people in the Gospels approach Jesus, there is weeping, as when Mary washes his feet with her tears; or pleading, as with the woman with an issue of blood; or heart-wrenching questions, like the rich young ruler.

When others approach Jesus, there is emotion and need, anguish and devotion. But here, the Greeks sound painfully formal as if they are attending high tea instead of requesting an audience with the Messiah. If I were one of the disciples, I would have told them to get in line, to take a number and wait their turn, that Jesus had enough to do what with healing the sick, raising the dead, casting out demons and dodging the authorities.

But Philip doesn't do that.

Philip delivers the formal message to Jesus. And despite the delivery, despite the formality, despite everything, Jesus takes the message and begins to preach. And his message is convoluted and hidden and strange but also very plain: the world is about to be upturned. Everything will change.

Every one of us approaches God differently. With formality, with irreverence, with indifference, with quiet familiarity. We come to God with our prayers, our hopes, our fears, our pain and our joy.

The message of the Greeks approach to Jesus is this: we are never asked to wait in line. We wish to see Jesus, each of us. We wish to have our burdens lifted and our sorrows shared. And Jesus sees us, hears us, laughs and cries with us, even on the way to the cross, even on the eve of his death.

We wish to see Jesus and we shall, no matter how or where we look.

The Rev'd Noelle York-Simmons

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March 31, 2010

The reading assigned to me for our Lenten Meditation Booklet contains just 13 verses, yet after careful study and meditation it became apparent to me that Luke's Chapter 4 represents the Alpha and the road to Omega of Jesus' three short years that changed the world, ultimately creating a new concept of religion, Christianity.

Jesus went to the River Jordan to see his cousin John who had been preaching to, and baptizing an ever growing crowd. Upon seeing Jesus, John baptized Him, and the Holy Spirit filled Jesus. Soon afterwards Jesus, "was led by the Spirit into the wilderness." He stayed there for forty days. Did He have conversations with God regarding His concerns about leaving His father's carpenter shop and setting out upon a ministry? With His mind filled day and night with a multitude of issues Jesus did not eat anything, apparently unaware of anything but the major changes coming into His life. Finally, He left the wilderness, famished and ready to find food. Jesus was confronted by the Devil, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."

4:4 Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Today we see the starving particularly in today's history of Haiti, destroyed by a mammoth earthquake that left thousands without food or water for days. Perhaps if we looked closely at the people of Haiti we could have seen the Devil at work, but mostly we saw the hand of God filling the people with grace and song while they patiently awaited food, water and rescue. Those filled with the thoughts of the Devil pushed through the crowds grabbing for food and water and fighting each other.

Right here on our own doorstep we watched the victims of Katrina either waiting patiently or fighting for food, water and housing. Even now those driven by hunger, lack of housing, health care and dignity either find a way to overcome their despair or lash out violently in search of their needs. When Jesus said, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone,'" it seems clear that He was teaching us to lean upon God and use our intellect to meet life's challenges.

The Devil continued to tempt Jesus, however Jesus answered him with a lesson for all, Luke 4:8, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Jesus' words ring loud and clear today. Even now as we renew our baptismal vows we are asked, "Do you believe in God the Father?" and we answer, "I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth." More than two thousand years have past since Jesus said, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." When we think about the impact of Jesus, his teaching and His love for us then, we find it carries on year after year into to all the lives that continue to follow His teaching.

Luke 4:12 Jesus, after all the temptations the Devil gave to him answered, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

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The Devil gave up testing Jesus and went away, but promised to return at "an opportune time."

Time and time again man kind has been tempted, some have bought the bait and learned a hard lesson, yet most people lean upon the strength of God and ultimately find a solution to their problem.

After finishing my personal meditation on these 13 verses (Luke 4:1-13) I was in awe of the power, majesty and insight that Jesus possessed. In just three years he accomplished a miracle. Perhaps due to His crucifixion, Christianity flourished with greater power, first among His followers and then among hordes of people. If Jesus had lived and continued on teaching and performing miracles into his old age he may not have had such an impact upon the world. Our love for Jesus and his Father is an intricate part of our lives today and will continue for future generations.

Daphne Church

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April 1, 2010

I grew up imagining that Maundy Thursday was something to do with mourning and was not that excited by it. I preferred Good Friday where we were given 'hot cross buns' and sang a ditty from the 1700s. As I grew, I sang in the choir of our parish church. We tended to what I now know to be a fairly 'high' liturgical style, and Maundy Thursday was a pretty solemn and beautiful observance with not many of our fellow parishioners present. (Not unlike today at All Saints' now I come to think of it.) I remember learning that the name of the day comes from the Latin Mandatum Novum, or 'New Commandment'. "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" said Jesus even as he had just made this love manifest by washing his disciples' filthy feet. Today is the day in which we remember, above all, the gifts of love made manifest, first in the Eucharist and then in the consequence of that meal in our service to one another in the world.

It is around the Table that we are formed for life by telling the story of what really matters in life, the story of Love made Manifest. In telling and hearing this story while in table fellowship and conversation with one another, we turn our attention to that which is of ultimate worth and find our lives and values, our choices and hopes all being shaped toward what really matters. This is worship, or Ultimate Worth-ship, and is a particular gift that we celebrate in this memorial of the Last Supper.

About once a year I have the privilege of meeting with some high school students who have been selected to take a class on 'Philanthropy.' We talk about the origins of the parish as a particular geographical region and the way that understanding has developed in the Anglican Tradition. I enjoy pointing out that our parish 'philanthropy' is not so much something we do out of noblesse oblige or left over from our abundance, but is something that is rooted in the ancient law of Israel. The Torah understood community as meaning that the most vulnerable in life (the weak, the widows, the orphans and the wayfarers) were especially protected as a matter of common humanity or community. In a parish understood not as a congregation of like-minded believers, but as a geographical region, the church provides care for everyone in that area as a matter of being the church and recognizing how essential is the new commandment to our identity as human beings and children of God. Caring for one another in effective, often difficult, service is something that really and truly matters to us. It is not an 'optional extra' in life. It is at the heart and meaning of life. In the Episcopal Church the pastoral responsibility for a civic geographical region like a city or county is shared among the Episcopal Churches in that locale. We offer care to everyone because that is the generosity that is extended to us by God and the kind of love that makes us more fully who we are.

What made this commandment of the Last Supper a new commandment, was Jesus saying 'as I have loved you'. We are commanded to love, remembering that the worst thing in life is not death. The fate-worse-than-death is breaking faith with the Love that made us for Love.

The Rev'd Geoffrey Hoare

April 2, 2010

How are we to sit with this text? How are we to sit with Good Friday? This year we find ourselves in John's story of Good Friday and it is different from the other gospels constructed as a drama where we are participants in the drama. Let's listen in.

From the opening scene of Jesus in the garden, we hear Jesus' question "Who are you looking for?" not once, but twice. It is a sister question to the first words uttered by Jesus in the book of John, "What are you looking for?" Jesus response to both questions is "I AM". Sound familiar? It is God's name for God's self spoken to Moses at the beginning of his ministry. In multiple places in John, Jesus refers to himself as "I AM" and gives us stories to help us understand who and what he is. I AM a shepherd that feeds his sheep; I AM a vine that nurtures the branches; I AM the doorway to life; I AM the bread of life; I AM the Way. To encounter Jesus is to encounter God—it is to come face to face with Love and its power for transformation. From the stories in John we know that some embrace it and others turn away in fear.

As the play continues, we find ourselves among "the Jews" and Pilate, with Peter and the disciples, no longer observers but participants confronted by Jesus' question, "who do you say that I AM?" The trial is the climax of Jesus ministry and even here, especially here, again Jesus offers life, possibility, peace to any who would accept it.

Trials and choosing isn't unfamiliar in the bible, old or new. Moses challenges the Israelites on the brink of entry into the land of promise: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life that you and your descendants may live." Choose openness, not closed-ness; choose curiosity not blaming; choose reaching out not drawing back; choose love not fear. Jesus offers us Life in his very being.

Who is on trial in the text? For John it isn't Jesus, rather it is all who witness. The tragedy isn't Jesus' impending death, but our own. The tragedy is our denial of the very thing we seek.

This passage would be much easier if we could just feel sorry for Jesus and grieve his death, his betrayal, his physical suffering. Or if we could focus on the capacity humans have for killing with righteous indignation, or the horror humans are capable of... that would give us cause for guilt that we could handle. But what John is asking of us is the willingness to be confronted by the question, "Who are you looking for?", "Who do you say that I am?" It is an invitation to Life, an invitation to Easter.

Rebecca Parker

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April 3, 2010

And I will pour out a spirit of compassion and supplication on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that, when they look on the one whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.

Zechariah 12.10