

Good Friday

April 14, 2006

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Psalm 22:1-21

Hebrews 10:1-25

John (18:1-40) 19:1-37

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Ecce Homo. Behold the man. Who is this who stands before Pilate? Who is this battered man who stands before the symbol of all the powers of force and coercion, this personification of might? Who stands in judgment?

Is this a simple Galilean Rabbi, a man of flesh and blood whose teachings of peace and compassion and whose healings of the pains of the world have caused Him to fall afoul of the establishment? So it would appear. There is nothing remarkable about him at first glance.

We know His history. We know about His preaching and His teaching – so powerful, so persuasive. We know about His apparently inexplicable ability to heal the sick and raise the dead; everyone knows about that. He's famous, He has a huge crowd following Him, not just a ragtag twelve from Galilee. That is worrisome.

But there is something strange about Him. Even now, mocked and exhausted, He is unbowed. There is a composure about Him, a calmness when any other man should be groveling in fear. "What does He know? What does He see that we do not?" thinks Pilate?

Does He really claim to be the King of the Jews? Those Jewish officials claim that He does. Preposterous, yet there is a quality that makes one uneasy. It's that composure. It's as though this poor, wretched prisoner were the one who is truly free, free to choose life or death. It's as though roles were reversed, and Pilate stands in judgment, not simply the judgment of humanity or history but eternal judgment – God's judgment – and that simply cannot be.

What should this "Passion Gospel" tell us? It should tell us that love and compassion and charity are deeply threatening to those in this world who rely on power and intimidation to maintain themselves. It should tell us that humility is anathema to the proud and the haughty. It has always been so; Pilate speaks for them all.

Pilate tells us that love and compassion and charity must be negated – eliminated – by the only means such persons understand. Pilate tells us that men such as he have an overwhelming fear that such things – things they cannot comprehend – might become the way of the world.

So the very perfect symbol of all that is good goes to His death on a barbarous cross, a light to the world extinguished by those who would live only in darkness. He is blameless; He is innocent of all crimes except one – the crime of challenging those who will not allow themselves to be challenged, assailing the unassailable – and raw force strikes Him down.

It is unjust; it is outrageous. It is all too common in this world of ours; all too common because even those who could and should cry out remain mute. We can be a fear-filled lot. We can be disciples of the truth who fold at the first assault of falsehood and seek convenient refuge from making a personal commitment – holes in which to hide – leaving it to others to stand at the foot of the cross.

It takes courage to stand at the foot of the cross and to be seen by a world that neither understands or practices love and compassion –

no more today than then – but that courage is as nothing compared to the courage of that man who calmly stood false trial to be unjustly condemned – the man on the cross dying for all – the strong and the weak, the brave and the cowardly, the proud and the humble, those with faith and those without – even the Pilates of this world.

Ecce Homo. Behold the man.

In His Holy Name.