

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Passion Sunday...also known as Palm Sunday...is a tough day to preach about because there is no single theme for the day.

We normally begin today's service in the parish hall or undercroft but, with Zoom, we will need to stay in place and use our imagination instead. So, imaginary short walk to the sanctuary echoes the triumphant entry by Jesus into the sacred and holy city of Jerusalem. And why not?

It is the holy Jewish feast days of the Passover, and thousands of Jewish visitors to Jerusalem jam into the city. By our symbolic walk, we become like those many thousands there that day...and the millions in the ages thereafter...who either were, or by imagination became, part of the great story of the Passion of our Lord.

We become like them....witnesses to almost unbelievable swings of mood within one short week. First, the triumphant entry, amid the joyous festival celebrated by thousands. Then later, a quiet meal among friends who hear, to their surprise, that "this is my body that is for you", and "this cup is the new Covenant sealed in my blood". And, also hearing that we will deny him, and one will betray him. And finally, we become like them...hiding in the shadows, stunned, in shock...through trial, conviction, torture and death.

Use your imagination again...and put yourself in the place of a minor character in today's story. He only appears in one verse, but he is the one closest to Jesus on the walk to crucifixion. The verse? "They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus."

A passer-by, minding his own business, visiting Jerusalem. Cyrene was an important Greek city in North Africa, containing a large population of Greek-speaking Jews, so we can imagine Simon having just arrived for the Passover. Suddenly, in front of him in the crowd, Roman soldiers drag a beaten prisoner through the streets, taking a long route so many will see him. The prisoner drops the cross and, from being whipped and beaten, he is too weak to take it further. The soldiers will not help, but can legally force someone else to do it. Simon is the closest able-bodied man, so he is chosen..clearly at the wrong place at the wrong time.

He takes up the cross. Gets blood on his robe. People spitting on him, the dust and dirt...his good clothes are ruined. He struggles and sweats with the weight, through the huge menacing crowd. Frightened. Getting lost in the detours. Walking beside a pathetic prisoner he has never seen before. Far from home, in a strange city, forced to do humiliating grunt work against his will.

Finally, they arrive, and he drops the cross. The soldiers get on with their business of crucifixion, but what happens to Simon? What festival? Talk about a wrecked experience! What does he do? Does he stay to watch? Is he one of the witnesses at this criminal's end?

We do not know. The gospels do not say.

But, in the naming of his sons, Alexander and Rufus, the gospel may...in our imagination...give us a hint. As Mark's gospel was generated about a generation after these events, we might presume that Alexander and Rufus were known to the hearers of this gospel, and perhaps they themselves were Christians. We do not know if Simon himself became a "Follower of the Way", but maybe he saw something. Maybe something happened to him in that experience, enough to tell his sons to change their lives.

Is he really in the wrong place at the wrong time? Is it simply the Roman soldier who pulls him out of the crowd, or does a power greater than Rome call him forth? Is it an accident that he ends up in this nightmare situation, dirty, humiliated, exhausted, or is it more than an accident?

Simon's first encounter is not religious in any conventional sense...instead, it is the calculated, brutal, agonizing death of a man. Still, it demonstrates the wisdom of God, waiting to be recognized...because the wisdom of God is not common sense, practical advice, moral uplift, or good feelings. Divine wisdom does not adhere to the rules of prudence. It is radical emptying of self. Sacrificial giving, in living and dying. Extravagant spending on the prisoner's part of blood and breath, of life and hope, knowing that God is greater than any darkness, and the world aches to be redeemed.

Simon came to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover of his people: how once, long ago, the Lord heard them cry out in their agony as Egyptian slaves, and they marched out to deliverance. What he sees in the killing place just outside Jerusalem is like the start of a different march with a new Passover lamb, going to the cross. And that the promise extends to both Gentile and Jew...deliverance from themselves.

He was compelled to go to the place of execution, carrying a cross. We are gathered here today for a variety of reasons...maybe out of habit, duty, commitment, curiosity, or spiritual thirst. It does not matter how we got here, but rather what we recognize. What we see. Is this a heartless execution, or something more? In the bread broken and shared at his command, and in the cross as our symbol, we can recognize the depths of foolish wisdom and answer a call for us to live... not by achievement, but by sacrifice of all gifts we have which manifests the power of God.

May we be always ready to give up what we cannot keep in order to gain what we cannot lose, in the name of God, as the Father, and as the Son and as the Holy Spirit. Amen.