

STANDING WITH JOSEPH

How quickly we forget. How swiftly we are blinded. How soon our ignorance returns like a thief in the night. Just a moment ago, the Gospels tell us that we were a *"multitude of the disciples"*, praising God *"joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power"* which we had seen, shouting *"Hosanna!"*, reveling in the fulfillment of hopes and dreams, *"Ride on, ride on, in majesty!"* Now we are swallowed up in an unruly mob, consumed by the passions of the rabble, infused with the chaotic spirit of the pulsing mass, participants in a rather ghastly spectacle.

For Jesus is dead, and we have assured it. Jesus is crucified, and we have demanded it. Jesus is gone, and we have hastened it. Not once, but three times Pilate asks the crowd and the elders -- asks of us -- to reconsider: *"why, what evil has he done?"* Three times Pilate offers an opportunity for the freedom of Jesus. Three times a choice is set before us. Three times we too deny Jesus as we hear that rooster crow in our own hearts, don't we? We know the story well, all too well, because the story is ours. And in each instance our voice grows louder: *"But they were insistent and said, 'He stirs up the people...'"*; *"Then they all shouted out together 'Away with this fellow! Release Barrabas for us!'"*; *"They kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified."* And it is we, you and I, our brothers and sisters; it is we who echo the terrible refrain: *"Crucify, crucify him!"* And so we do, and so it is, and so is set in motion by the most unwitting and clueless and arrogant multitude that one can imagine, the very redemption of all humankind. And so is set in motion that course of human and holy events into which we journey today. And so is set in motion hope, in the very instance and the insane moment when all hope seems drained from the world around us by virtue of our very blindness and hard-heartedness.

Many years ago now, in a faraway congregation, and in the days before email existed, a devoted parishioner wrote me a very long letter during Holy Week. And in that handwritten letter this friend spent considerable and genuine spiritual energy trying to assure and convince

me that he alone, if no one else, for sure, would **not** have been part of that multitude; that he alone, for sure, would **never** have shouted for the crucifixion of Jesus. That he alone, would indeed, have stood alone. He meant to affirm his present faith and deep belief by somehow rewriting his role in the unruly script, by somehow reshaping history to his own personal ends, suggesting both boldly and wistfully that he was certain he would have stepped forward, in that awful hour, to accept Pilate's offer for the release of Jesus. His was a deep and heartfelt and poignant spiritual struggle that I have obviously never forgotten.

But when I met with him soon after Easter that same year, I gently urged him to reread the Gospel accounts, and to prayerfully reconsider all of our various complicities and uncertainties among those events that we now call The Passion. He faithfully did so, with deep and authentic engagement, and, soon enough, he wrote me another one of his very long letters (I got a lot of them that year....). But this time the enormity of our human imperfections, the depth of our human ambiguity and pain and searching and wondering, had struck him. This time the tension and the conflict and the anxiety and the apprehension within the human heart had been made all too real. And this time he saw and felt that, indeed, it was almost essential to be a part of that mob so as to truly understand the precious value of salvation and the promise that somehow emerged from those awful days. He had reexamined his mind and his heart, he had reopened himself yet again to the mysterious workings of the Holy Spirit, and he had experienced a genuine personal transformation of the kind we often long for and pray about.

Now, he wrote, he felt much closer to Joseph of Arimathea than to some enlightened hero amongst the crowd. For my searching friend, it was only in the aftermath, only when the crowds were "*beating their breasts*" and heading home after the "*spectacle*", only from that sad and poignant distance alongside the women on a hillside, only on that "*green hill far away*", only here and then that the true understanding of Jesus the Christ -- Jesus the Messiah -- began to take

shape. He felt that whatever his inadequacies and his longings, he could imagine himself caring for the body and tending to the burial all the same, offering some dignity and closure amid the madness and the dust. Some waiting and some watching. My friend had found his place.

The old Gospel hymn asks us, as it always does, *“were you there when they crucified my Lord?”* And indeed we were, and our voices are hoarse and they are dry from hastening the moment. The question we must now ask, in the aftermath of this terrible instance, is the same question my friend once asked of me, in a way: *“are you still there now, like Joseph and the women, prepared to step forward in the aftermath, prepared to do something, whatever that ‘something’ may be?”* Are you prepared to continue this lonely pilgrim journey, now that the crowd has dispersed and life is apparently finished? Are you prepared to *“wait expectantly for the Kingdom of God”*, without a clue as to when it might appear or what it might actually look like, and to follow through the uncertain days and months and years and maybe even generations which might very well lie ahead? For if a dying criminal or a Roman centurion can see with all his heart that Jesus is the Messiah, and if a dying criminal or a Roman soldier can imagine that a glorious Kingdom might now rise out of the ashes of death, and if a crucified thief can receive assurance of a place in Paradise alongside this Savior, how can we not do the same?

And so I urge you, as we prepare to walk on the most complex, sacred, and potentially life-altering passage of our earthly lives, give yourselves over. Give it all up except for the hope of God. Repent and return to the Lord, in whatever way you might understand or feel that. Remember that you and I really are dust, and it really is to dust that we shall return. Remember that you and I helped put Jesus up onto that cross. But also remember that in time, in our own ways, with our own gifts and with our own talents and with our own compassions and with our own dreams, each of us will also help to take him down.

Most of all, whatever you do in these next 7 days, please remember this: God's plan for us, and ours for God, is deliverance and it is hope. Even amidst distress, confusion, and chaos. We have been liberated once from Egypt and we must not countenance returning there again. Yes, some will choose to stay behind, but as a whole, we must not. Yes, some may prefer a Pharaoh who makes the chariots run on time, but we must live with open spirits and courageous hearts, ripe to the new possibilities which are emerging all around us and which are being set free from deep within us.

And this deliverance is really, in the end, pure grace. Unconditional. Free. Set before us. The gift which keeps on giving. Eternal life itself. With such high stakes and life-changing possibilities utterly in our midst, can you and I "*not keep awake one hour*".... or maybe even longer?

~ **Amen.**