

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, Commonly Called Passion Sunday, March 29, 2009
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The last two weeks of Lent are called Passiontide. The tone becomes more somber as we draw nearer to the Cross. Today's lessons provide material for reflection.

In the gospel (John 8:46), an argument takes place between Jesus and the usual suspects. If we step back and think about it, we will realize that the whole scene is absurd. Jesus reveals himself as "I AM," the God who spoke to Moses on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 3:14), the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. That is to say, the God who once appeared only in the form of a cloud or fire is now present in person.

And his people are arguing with him, calling him a bastard and saying he is demon possessed. It is quite shocking, really, to act this way towards God. And the contentious ones are not the irreligious, non-observant Jews. The contentious ones are the people who go to synagogue and temple, read their Bibles and want God to save Israel. They claim to worship God, and they are about to kill him.

One way to meditate on the Passion is to focus on what those evil people did. A better way to meditate on the Passion is to recognize ourselves in those evil people. As the hymn says, "I crucified thee." The characters in the Passion bring to full flower sins and unfaithful tendencies that are also present in us. We also are churchgoers and Bible readers who are waiting for the coming of our Lord. Do we contend with God as they did?

The main issue with the Jewish leadership (the "Jews" in the gospel) is that Jesus called them to change, and they didn't want to. They were prepared to accept a God who fit into their system and way of life, who sided with them, the righteous, against the Gentiles and the sinners. But they weren't prepared to deal with a God who said that everyone needed to change, including them.

There is at least some of this attitude in all of us. We will accept a god who fits into our existing world view; that will provide us comfort in times of pain and help in times of need. Yet what do we do when we pray for and expect certain things and our prayers are met with nothing more than the image of a man dying on the cross? What do we do when, instead of comfort and help, Jesus provides confrontation? What do we do when he tells us that we must think and behave in new ways?

The argument didn't end well for the enemies of Jesus. Within a generation, the Roman legions destroyed the city and temple because, as Jesus said, the people "knew not the time of their visitation" (Luke 19:44). The destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 is an important part of the Passion. For it shows us that there are consequences for refusing to listen to the Son of God. As Psalm 95 warns us, "Today, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts."

But then we come to the epistle (Hebrews 9:11) and discover that Jesus allowed himself to be argued with, arrested and crucified precisely so that, by his death, he might forgive our rebellion. As Hebrews says, "How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your consciences from dead works to serve the living God?" (9:11f.).

We see ourselves in those who opposed Jesus or who turned away from him in fear. But then we hear the high priestly words of the heavenly intercessor, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

Next Sunday we will cry out with the guilty crowd, “His blood be on us and on our children.” Yet we know that this blood has two implications. There is blood guilt, the guilt that Cain brought upon himself for killing his brother. And there is the cleansing blood that washes away our guilt, what Hebrews calls, “the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (12:24).

These are the parameters of our Passiontide reflections. On the one hand, there’s the presence of “I AM” and the weight of sin and guilt that results from not responding to him with obedience. On the other hand, there’s the death for sin on the cross that takes away our sin and guilt. We have to take these in order, for confession comes first, then forgiveness. We must die before we can rise.

In terms of the gospel today, our confession should focus on the ways we contend with God. Sometimes it is not so much that we need to confess a particular act of sin. Sometimes it is rather that we need to confess a general attitude that resists God’s will in some significant way; that, perhaps, rejects the call to share in the cross.

As we noted, the contentious people in the gospel were religious. The danger of religion is that it can become an outward form that covers an inward rebellion. We should examine our religion to make sure it is a means of hearing and responding to God’s word.

For example, consider the Lenten fast. The fast is not a badge of merit. It is not a way of showing how righteous we are for having done or not done this or that thing. The fast is profitable only inasmuch as it has turned us away from things and towards God: St. Paul said about the religion of the Galatians, “In Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation” (6:15).

The last two weeks of Lent are a time to bring our Lenten penitence to a close with a good and honest confession, bearing in mind that the purpose of confession is not to wallow in our guilt, but to be forgiven, bearing in mind that the purpose of the Passion is to lead us to Easter.

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