

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

*Friday, April 22, 2011  
Preached at Grace Church, Elmira*

*Good Friday  
The Rev. Fr. D.W. Matthews*

---

As I sat amidst the tranquility of the monastery grounds and pastures of Mount Saviour last week for a few days collecting my thoughts and spirit for this Holy Week, I began to ponder how the disciples must have felt during that initial week — that first week we now call Passion Week. Last week the rains fell upon the beautiful, picturesque sheep pastures of the hillside of the monastery. The sheep and their companion donkeys grazed upon the emerging grasses and hays that the brothers dispersed on the fields, and the ewes began their lambing season, so each day brought forth evidence of new life to some degree. All was well and apparently glorious . . . .

Yet, when I would take my trusty umbrella and begin to walk to the edges of the grounds, particularly to the northern end of the pastures, things changed dramatically. The land suddenly fell off to a steep, rocky incline — long ago ripped away by a glacier — a treacherous ridge, rocky and dangerously precarious to man and beast at any time of year. Here the gentle rains that fell upon the pastures above were no longer lovely and calm, but became torrents of rushing waters — tearing at the land, ripping away at the hillside and the very fabric of the earth and the roots of everything that found life within it.

To the disciples, the trip to Jerusalem for Passover must have seemed “meet and right” so to take. Young, enthusiastic, idealistic, their cups must have runneth over during the triumphal entry into the Holy City. Amid the palms and hosannas, they could actually see themselves sitting on the right and left hand of power. At last, Jesus was bringing His Gospel message to the right place — the City of David. His word now would be brought to the entire nation, and the leaders of Israel would be confronted with His call to repentance and Spirit-induced faith. God’s Kingdom, the disciples must have thought, would come — and come to coincide with their journey to Jerusalem. Here, the great decision would take place, so let the inauguration of the new King of Glory begin!

I suspect that coming into Jerusalem must have been something akin to emerging on to the beautiful, wonderful pastures of Mount Saviour for the disciples on a glorious spring day. The view for them was enthralling — captivating. Everything must have seemed so right and perfect. Yet, not far beyond there were also warning signs that were not heeded. Too much magic in the air perhaps? Who knows, but we know that they were not overly inclined to heed those signs and, quite honestly, what would have been the sense to paying attention to any kind of approaching danger? They were princes, if not kings of the world, after all.

However, Jerusalem had seen and been the fate of many a prophet — Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Micah and Zechariah — all had been martyred there. There were the ominous words even of their own teacher, such as when Jesus spoke at Caesarea Philippi, to Peter and the disciples, about His own suffering and death in Jerusalem (Mk 8:31-9:1). And, of course, there was our Lord’s lament over Jerusalem — the pathos in His voice as He talked about how He would have

gathered the city to Him as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but it was a city that had remained unmoved (Lk 13:34).

And so these signs, and the signs that transpire through this week in Jerusalem, lead us to this breath-stopping, out-of-control tragedy. The verdant green pastures suddenly become a perilous, treacherous chasm — an abyss of darkness, treachery — the ultimate blackness we all witness of the human soul. Whatever breaks could have been applied as Jesus spent His last days in Jerusalem went out early. The Gospel message hurtled down the hillside — brakeless, stopless, breathless and for the disciples there was no escape nor halt to this calamity. No place to go, except to bail out before they careened headlong over the cliff of utter destruction . . . . and that is exactly what they did.

Can you possibly think of a lonelier death? Deserted by His closest companions and dearest friends. Rebuked by His nation, silenced in shame forever by His critics from the intelligentsia and the aristocracy — the defenders of the Law and the Pax Romana. Refuted in everything He said as a heretic, and convicted at everything turned as a deluded blasphemer — exposed were His marvelous deeds of power as if they were works of the evil one. In collaboration with these followers of His, Jesus had sought to deceive the people and lead them astray. Reduced to a silent sufferer — lashed to look like something out of a slaughterhouse, jeered at, spit upon — our Lord went to what appeared to be a god-less, miracle-less death.

Abandoned not only by His disciples, but seemingly by the God of limitless grace in whose name and authority He had spoken and acted, the darkness gathered more intensely. They had all jumped off the out-of-control, brakeless catastrophe. Only Jesus remained . . . . .

Whoever says that all religions, deep down, are all the same, needs to look at this statement again in my opinion. This was not Moses dying in his early 100's after a rich, full life in sight of the Promised Land. Nor was it Mohammad, perishing at his harem in the arms of one of his favorite wives, having led the remaining years of his life as the ruler of Arabia. Nor was it Buddha, who died serenely in his sleep at a ripe old age comforted by devoted disciples. But this was a young man struck down in the prime of His life — betrayed, humiliated, and left for carrion — all for being an enemy of “law and order,” even though His Kingdom was not of this world.

I believe that Thomas Merton, in his book *No Man Is an Island* (1955), captured the feeling that should fall over us this day just as the shadows fell over Calvary at the hour of the Lord's death. It is a feeling that should lead to the most profound choice we have. Merton says:

“Can this be true? Is there any greater wretchedness than to taste the dregs of our own insufficiency and misery and helplessness, and to know that we are certainly worth nothing at all?

“Yet it is blessed to be reduced to these depths if, in them, we can find God. Until we have reached the bottom of the abyss, there is still something for us to choose between all and nothing. There is still something in between. We can still evade the decision. When we are reduced to our last extreme, there is no further evasion. The choice is a terrible one. It is made in the heart of darkness, but with an intuition that is unbearable by its angelic clarity — when we who have been destroyed and seem to be in hell miraculously choose God” (p. 208).

That is the choice with which we are left this day. This Friday that was “Foul Friday” or “Frightful Friday” long before it was ever “Good Friday” to us, really becomes the day we are left to choose between all or nothing at all. The choice is between God and the abyss of own self-will run riot. The choice to rely on grace alone — and not on any whiff of righteousness we imagine that we possess. That is the choice we are presented with at this hour. Nothing in between, just God’s grace. To reach out and accept it. To let go and let God. And most assuredly, to remember that the radical newness of God’s promise of resurrection is always coming — sacrificially bestowed.