

The Gift of Good Friday

Today is the day when everything falls apart.

Today is the day when, for those who follow Jesus, it seems like the only news is disaster and defeat.

Today is the day when, as we hear in the reading of the Passion, Jesus loses everything.

Today Jesus loses his disciples. Even the inner circle of his closest friends run away and hide themselves, after the soldiers and temple police come to Gethsemane and take Jesus away under guard. Even Peter, the Rock on whom Jesus would build his church, before the night is over, out of fear and cowardice, publicly denies even knowing who Jesus is. Only John and Jesus' mother Mary remain—and in the end all they can do is stand at the foot of the cross and weep. These, too, Jesus has lost.

Today Jesus loses his supporters. We are told elsewhere in the Gospel that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were both members of the council, members of the Sanhedrin, who were sympathetic to Jesus' message, who were at least open to Jesus' teaching and Jesus' meaning. And yet, at Jesus' interrogation before the high priest, they are silent, saying nothing, offering no defense, making no move to interrupt the miscarriage of justice unfolding before them. These, too, Jesus has lost.

Today Jesus loses the crowds. The multitudes—the devoted, the enthusiastic, the merely curious—the multitudes had been happy enough to see Jesus only a few days before, when he entered the city with a triumphal procession, like a king returning to claim his throne. But now their mood has turned—maybe Jesus' teaching was too hard for them; maybe their leaders sowed opposition among them; maybe it's a different crowd altogether, people who never were all that interested in Jesus and have gathered to see what all the Roman fuss is about—whatever the reason, the crowd has changed, and now they want to see Jesus hurt, now they want to see Jesus broken, now they line up at Gabbatha, at the Stone Pavement, to see the humiliation of the man-who-would-be-king, and to demand that he be crucified. These, too, Jesus has lost.

Today Jesus loses his dignity, his basic human rights. It wasn't enough for the soldiers and temple police to arrest him: they had to humiliate him: they tied him up like an animal, they chained him like a violent criminal, they led him through the streets like a conquered and captured king. Pilate orders him flogged—which means that the soldiers take a whip made of two straps of leather, with lead weights tied to the ends, perhaps with bits of stone, metal, nails, tied along the length, and with those straps they beat Jesus across the back, until his skin was torn and his flesh was cut and he nearly passed out from the pain. And because he'd claimed to be a king, the soldiers dress him up like a king, in mocking parody of the trappings of the Roman emperor himself: a purple cloak, and instead of the rod of office, a stick, and instead of the wreath of laurel leaves, a crown woven out of branches of thorn. And they come up to him and slap him in the face, and take the stick out of his hands, and hit him over the head with it to force the thorns down good and hard, and say "Hail, king!" And Pilate brings him out to show him off to the crowd, and says "This is what Roman power does to your king." In the end Jesus has no dignity, no worth, no appearance that we should desire him. These, too, Jesus has lost.

And then, Jesus loses his life. Hung from the cross, with thick, square nails driven through his wrists, his whole body-weight suspended in such a way that it is impossible for him to breathe, impossible for his rib cage to move enough to inflate his lungs, impossible for his heart to force blood through his cramped and straining arteries—hung from the cross, Jesus suffocates, dying by slow, agonizing degrees. Life, too, Jesus has lost.

This is the day when we remember how Jesus lost everything.

And yet, as we read this story of the Passion, as we come face to face with the way John depicts Jesus' suffering and death, Jesus doesn't *look* like a loser. Jesus has everything stripped away from him—and yet, at every turn of the story, John shows Jesus in control. John shows Jesus confronting all the players in this tragedy with the

truth, the truth about himself, the truth about themselves, the truth about God. John shows Jesus doing the work God has given him to do, and trusting that, whatever else happens, God will bring that work to completion. At every turn of this terrible, bloody story, John shows Jesus, in his faithfulness, in control.

When the troops come to arrest Jesus in the garden, it's Jesus who asks them whom they're looking for—and even when Jesus identifies himself, the guards are afraid to take him, until he yields himself to them.

When Jesus stands, bound, before the high priest, being questioned, interrogated, accused, Jesus shows that it is the priests and scribes themselves who are in bondage, so captivated by Caiaphas's moral calculus—"It's better for one man to die than for the whole nation to perish"—that they cannot see the justice to which Jesus calls them.

When Pilate swaggers and boasts of his imperial power, dangling before Jesus the options of execution or release, Jesus says "You have no power over me; the real power comes from above."

When Jesus is on the cross, in the midst of his own pain, he sees the pain of his mother and the disciple whom he loves—and in compassion for them he commits them to each other's care, and from that hour the disciple takes her into his own home.

When Jesus dies, his final words are "It is finished"—which means not just "It's over, it's ended"—but also means "It is complete. It is accomplished. It is perfected."

At each turn of the story, John shows Jesus in control—not a helpless victim, but one who gives himself, willingly, in the power of God's love.

And that is the paradox of Good Friday, that is the mystery of the cross: that Jesus loses everything, and yet in Jesus nothing is lost; that Jesus is stripped of everything, and yet nothing is taken from him, but all is given as a free gift of love. And it is the freedom of Jesus' love that transforms even injustice, even suffering, even death, into witness to God's faithfulness, God's truth, God's love.

And it is that same freedom of love, that same witness to the faithfulness of God, to which Jesus calls us. Jesus' love can transform our sin, our suffering, our injustice, our very selves, into testimonies to God's truth, witnesses of God's love. Jesus' free gift of himself on the cross sets us free, as the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, to "approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water." Jesus' free gift of love on the cross sets us free to give that gift in life.

And that is precisely what we do, here in this Good Friday liturgy. In our worship today, we take up Jesus' gift and we give it again. In a few moments we'll pray the Solemn Collects, which are the most extensive and most intensive prayers of intercession we share at any time in the Church Year. We gather in the very shadow of Jesus' cross to offer prayers for the world Jesus died to save. In a few moments we will receive communion. We don't celebrate the Eucharist this day; but in the shadow of Jesus' cross we share the bread and wine he gave us as a sign of his love, he gave us as food to strengthen us to share the gift of love. In our worship today, we take up the gift Jesus gave on the cross and we give it again in our lives.

Today is the day when everything falls apart, when the news is destruction and disaster, when Jesus loses everything. And yet today is also the day when everything comes together, when the witness to love is accomplished, when Jesus gives everything. May that mystery of faithful love enliven and empower us in the shadow of Jesus' cross, in the light of Jesus' life. Amen.