

Year A Sunday of the Passion Where is Our Hope Matthew 26 v14 to 27 v66

This is a story of abandonment and betrayal by the humans who had surrounded Jesus, by those who hardly knew him, by those who had something worldly to lose.

We begin with Judas. He approaches the religious leaders and offers to betray Jesus to them in exchange for money. “What will you give me?” he asks. The lure of wealth and the earthly power that accompanies it has led him into betrayal of a friend...someone he shares bread with, someone he will greet with a kiss. His relationship with Jesus loses its lustre and its importance when placed alongside the shine of silver coins.

Jesus knows he is going to be betrayed and Judas singles himself out. Surely it is not I, Lord, he protests. Jesus tells his disciples sitting at dinner with him that they will all desert him. Peter assures him he will never desert him. Surely it is not I, Lord.

After supper, they go to the garden of Gethsemane to pray. Jesus goes a little apart from the others but brings with him his three closest disciples – Peter, James, and John. He tells them he is deeply troubled and wants the comfort of their presence – their waking presence. Yet, in their friend’s time of need, they repeatedly fall asleep. With bellies full of food and wine, their relationship with Jesus takes a back seat to the “gratification of the flesh”. They give in to their own physical needs and leave their emotionally distraught friend high and dry.

Judas goes through with the betrayal – sealed with a kiss – and Jesus is taken to the house of the high priest, Caiaphas, where the scribes and elders are gathered as well. In this section of the drama, we find an abandonment of ethics and morals in favour of the world’s corrupt way of dealing with irritating problems that will not go away. The chief priests and the rest of the council have been looking for false

testimony. It is very significant that two people finally come forward and say the same thing because two people are needed according to Jewish law. This charge and Jesus' somewhat evasive answer to Caiphas asking him if he is the Messiah, the Son of God are what is used to condemn Jesus to death. It is the behaviour of the council afterward that really stands out to me: they spit in Jesus' face, they strike him, they taunt him. These are things they do not need to do but, rather, they choose to do. They choose to be violent. They choose to humiliate Jesus. Their relationship with the God who is love and true peace is forgotten in their anger. This has been building. Their jealousy and fear that Jesus is leading the people down a path that leads away from them, stripping them of their power and control, leads them down a path away from God.

Meanwhile, Peter angrily and forcefully denies knowing Jesus three times, as Jesus knew he would. The governor, Pontius Pilate realizes that it is jealousy motivating the religious leaders and knows Jesus is innocent of the crimes and yet Pilate is a coward. He wants to keep his powerful position as governor and so he pacifies the religious leaders and the crowd by condemning Jesus to death, releasing instead a known criminal. The crowds, who had so recently adored Jesus and hailed him as king turn on him, calling out for blood. Jesus hasn't lived up to their expectations of king and Messiah – he looks weak and broken. The soldiers, too, put on a disturbing display of violence and mockery – hitting Jesus, spitting on him, taunting him. Jesus is nailed, naked, to the cross – a shameful, humiliating punishment. The bystanders, the chief priests, the scribes, the elders, and even the two bandits hanging on either side of him, all deride him in the same way: If you are the Son of God, they say with scorn, come down from the cross. Impress us with a miracle and we'll believe in you. Operate according the world's idea of power and success

and we'll fall in line behind you. Except that we know they wouldn't. Jesus says extremely little during this ordeal because he has already shown the people who he is. He has already told the people who he is. These people have already decided not to believe.

In all of this betrayal and abandonment of someone called friend and Teacher, in all of this horrific display of the human capacity to hurt, to demean, to kill, to lust for death and blood, where is the hope in all of this? When Judas realizes that the religious leaders have condemned Jesus to death, he tries to undo the betrayal he orchestrated for money. It is too late. He hangs himself. Peter hears the rooster crow and realizes he has denied his Lord. He cannot undo the denials. He weeps bitterly. The centurion and other soldiers and bystanders at Jesus' cross see the darkness, feel the earth shake violently at Jesus' death. They realize, too late, who Jesus is. "Truly this man was God's Son!" they say but Jesus is hanging lifeless beside them.

Where is the hope as one person after another breaks relationship with God?

Where is the hope as the worst of humanity is put on ugly display? Where is the hope when realization of wrongdoing comes too late to undo the wrong?

Our hope is on display throughout this passage as well. Our hope lies with God. At dinner, Jesus serves all of his disciples – even his betrayer. At supper, Jesus makes a covenant with all of his disciples even though they will soon desert him. He tells them he is giving his body and his blood to them and for them, to open to them the ability to be in relationship with God in God's kingdom even while we are yet sinners. In the garden, a frightened and distressed Jesus steels his nerves and decides to die to give life to those sinners. We see our hope in the steadfast love

and faithfulness of Jesus the Christ. Amid the betrayal and abandonment, the denials, and the violence, as person after person falls prey to the lures of the world's idea of power – property, position, and pocketbook – amid the turning away from relationship with God, Jesus shows us a different way, the way of life, life in relationship with God. Jesus refuses to participate in the ways of the world, the ways incompatible with life in God's kingdom. With the ugliness of humanity on display, Jesus displays nothing but love.

This is where the story leaves us. It ends with a dead Messiah and we are left with a whole week looming ahead of us to dwell on the reality that the ugliness of humanity killed the Son of God. Greed, corruption, the lust for power, the desire to operate the way the world sees things, has left us with a dead Messiah. We are left with a whole week looming in front of us to contemplate our participation in the ways of the world that has left us with a dead Messiah. Where is our hope? “When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb.” A rich man...a man who untangles himself enough from the ways of the world, a man who is brave enough to stand before the governor, a pious Jew with the courage to reveal himself as a follower of Jesus, one who maintains his relationship with the Christ even after his scandalous death on a cross. The scene widens and we see Mary Magdalene and then we see the other Mary – mother of James and Joseph – and then we see the other women...a community of believers, a small community but a community nonetheless, maintaining relationship with God. And so, what looks like the end is really the beginning...Here is our hope.