

## Fear and Loathing at Golgotha

When Charles Dickens wrote, “it was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” he might have been describing this morning’s Gospel reading. In the course of a scant twenty minutes, Matthew takes us from the heights of Jesus’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem to the depths of his execution. We can imagine watching Jesus enter the holy city, jostling for a better view, hearing the cheers, smelling the dust and sweat of our neighbors, feeling the kiss of the hot desert sun on our cheeks. We can also imagine standing witness at Golgotha, hearing not hosannas but the cruel taunts of the onlookers and Jesus’s labored breath, smelling the reek of blood and iron, feeling that same hot sun scald our faces as we gaze up at our dying Lord. Was there ever a more glorious hope? Was there ever a more overwhelming despair?

Reading the story of Jesus’s trial and execution always makes me feel a little sick. Even knowing that a breathtaking miracle is about to occur, the sheer ugliness of it all slaps me hard across the face every time. The Sanhedrin might have sincerely believed that they had to silence Jesus before he drew the wrath of the Roman Empire down on their people. Despite his wife’s warning, Pilate might honestly have imagined he was just managing a minor civic nuisance. The soldiers who carried out Pilate’s orders might have told themselves that they were just doing their jobs. But there’s so much treachery in this story, so much brutality, so much wanton cruelty, so much nastiness. Why all the flogging, the cursing, the shouting, the spitting, the mockery? What in Heaven’s name is wrong with these people?

It’s a fair question, but I can’t pretend for an instant that we moderns are entirely superior to the people who betray and brutalize Jesus in the Gospels. We may not literally crucify people anymore, but we still execute convicts and detain prisoners without legal recourse in places like Guantánamo Bay. Too many of our citizens die violently at the hands of police officers who are

sworn to protect them. Too many of our children die in mass shootings or by suicide, victims of bullying and other abuses. We can look down our noses at the moral failings of our ancestors, but it's worth considering what practices we take for granted that future generations will condemn. My own list includes systemic racism, looking the other way in the face of pedophilia and elder abuse, burying the Earth in single-use plastics, factory farming, and embracing the toxic individualism that demonizes anyone in need. Your list of socially accepted horrors may be different. My point isn't to cast blame, but it *is* to say that there's a reason we faithful, churchgoing Christians play the crowd when we read the Passion narrative each year. There but for the grace of God we, too, might well have gone.

Many of the people who behave badly in this story act out of fear. The Sanhedrin are terrified that the Romans will react to Jesus's provocations by brutalizing the people. When Jesus is arrested, the disciples initially put up a feeble resistance, then scatter in terror. Peter, Jesus's most stalwart supporter, denies him three times to save his own skin. Pilate, too, is frightened enough by the mob to condemn Jesus even though he knows our Lord has done nothing wrong. He crucifies Jesus just to keep the peace; that hand-washing routine isn't fooling anybody.

And then, there's Judas. Matthew implies that Judas betrays Jesus for those thirty pieces of silver, anywhere from one to four months' wages for a day laborer at the time. It's a significant amount of money, but perhaps not enough by itself to motivate treachery against a friend and mentor. Maybe Judas was just a greedy snake, but Jesus thought well enough of him to take Judas into his inner circle. Even as Judas betrays him, Jesus calls him "friend." So perhaps Andrew Lloyd Weber is right that Judas also acts out of fear, so terrified that Jesus's challenge to the authorities is getting out of hand that he doesn't think through what the consequences of his actions will be.

Fear may also motivate the crowd, making them clamor for Jesus's death to divert Roman suspicion from themselves. They may also be angry that Jesus seemingly turns out to be powerless, just another in a long line of false Messiahs. Their insistence on releasing Barabbas, the famous freedom fighter, represents a choice to trust the physical power of weapons over Jesus's spiritual power of redemption. It's a choice we still make too often today.

But even if we concede that much of the shameful behavior on display in this morning's Gospel is based in fear, it's hard to understand why the soldiers, the people, even the thief on the cross beside him beat and mock Jesus so mercilessly. Their cruelty was predicted by Isaiah in his prophecy of the Suffering Servant, some of which we read this morning. But I think it's a copout to say that Jesus's sufferings had to happen because prophecy had to be fulfilled. Pope Francis has a better explanation. He believes that, "at the root of all cruelty there is a need to downplay one's own faults and limitations." All of these people know that what they're doing is wrong. Maybe they're scared, maybe they're angry, maybe they just don't know how to stop the chain of events before things get completely out of hand. So they lean into cruelty, trying to convince themselves and each other that Jesus deserves what's coming to him.

That's why Jesus's predictions at the Last Supper are so important. He knows *exactly* what's going to happen. He knows that Judas will betray him, the disciples will desert him, the authorities will be ruthless, and his death on the cross will be agonizing and slow. We can read his words as accusations; the disciples certainly seem to take them that way. But perhaps Jesus, our forgiving Lord, isn't condemning his friends. Perhaps he's simply warning them, letting them know what's coming so they won't be unbearably shocked and mortified when they can't stand up to the trials ahead.

If Jesus is, as we profess him to be, the only living Son of God, he was never helpless. At any moment, he could have smacked the whips and thorns out of the soldiers' hands, jumped down from the cross and ascended into Heaven, telling the Father, "You know, Dad, with the benefit of hindsight, that wasn't such a great idea." But he didn't. As Bible scholar Douglas R.A. Hare observes, Jesus was fully human throughout his Passion, feeling every cut, every blow, every insult just as we would. He knew what was going to happen to him, he knew how much it was going to hurt, he knew that his closest friends were going to let him down in every conceivable way, and *he did it all anyway*. For us. He did it for us whether we deserved it or not. He loved us that much then; he loves us that much still.

It's not my place to argue with the illustrious Apostle Paul, but I'm a little uneasy with the idea that Jesus took the beating that our transgressions earned. It makes God sound vindictive and vengeful when I don't believe he's either. Maybe the crucifixion was divine payment for the sins of a fallen humanity – a lot of brilliant theologians have thought so. But I believe Jesus's Passion comes with an additional, urgent message. No matter how unworthy we are, no matter how badly we behave, no matter how many mistakes we make or how far we're willing to go to avoid admitting that we've made them, God loves us enough to let us put him through Hell. Instead of feeling guilty that we did it, maybe we can be grateful enough not to do it again.

We're coming to the end of Lent, the season when we're supposed to examine our lives, repent, and return to the Lord. Perhaps, like me, you've taken stock in recent weeks and found some things of which you're not particularly proud. Over the next few days, we'll walk with Jesus through his Passion. As you go, try to lay your mistakes and regrets somewhere by the side of the road. That way, your hands and hearts will be empty of guilt and shame, free to embrace our Lord when the glory of Easter finally arrives. *Amen.*