

Palm Sunday - Youth Pilgrimage

I. Introduction - Feeling Uncomfortable

We have just listened to and shared in a reading from St. Luke's Gospel about the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. As you just saw, three people read various parts of that that Gospel reading: one served as the narrator - to keep the story moving; another served as Christ - to highlight what Jesus said and did; still another took the part of various people who were involved in the Lord's death - for example, Peter or Pontius Pilate . . . And the congregation, all of you, took the part of the crowd.

I have to tell you something. Taking the part of the crowd in the reading of the Lord's passion and death makes me uncomfortable. I've never liked saying the words, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Sometimes I have thought to myself, "If I had been there when the Lord was on trial, I wouldn't have joined the crowd in shouting for the Lord to suffer and die. I'm better than that! I would have defended the Lord!" Maybe you've thought the same thing.

II. Better Than What?

A long time ago, I realized I needed to pray about this feeling - that somehow I would have been better than the people who were in the crowd calling for the Lord to be crucified . . . or that I would have been better than the disciples who abandoned Jesus, the Apostle Peter who denied the Lord, or Pontius Pilate who lost control of the crowd and let Jesus be condemned.

So, what would I have done when people were shouting for Jesus to die? Would I have risked my own life by walking up to Pilate's Judgment Seat to plead for Jesus' life, to defend him? Would I have pleaded with the people all around me in the crowd not to condemn an innocent man who had said and did such good things - a man they were cheering just a few days before? We'd all like to think that we would have done these things - but probably not. How often we go along with the crowd - we call it "peer-pressure". We don't like to be out of sync with what everyone else is thinking or doing - even if, deep down in our hearts, we know it's wrong.

Or let's take the case of the Apostles who went into the Garden to pray with Jesus after the Last Supper. Jesus was in agony because he was about to die for the sins of

the whole world. What did his closest followers do? Instead of praying with Jesus in his most difficult hour, they fell asleep. “How could they do that?” I thought one night, as I drifted off to sleep in the little chapel in my residence. How often we think we’re too sleepy or too busy to get to Sunday Mass or to spend a little time each day with the Lord in prayer.

How about Peter whom the Lord put in charge of the other Apostles? He denied that he even knew the Lord and he did this not once but three times . . . and he did this after promising to defend the Lord to the very end. I’d certainly like to think I would have been better than that . . . better than what? Every time we commit sin, we deny the Lord. We are saying not so much by words but by our actions, that we don’t belong to the Lord but instead to the world. And so often I find myself committing the same sins over and over again, confessing the same sins again and again . . . how patient the Lord is! Again and again he asks me and he will ask you this too - “Do you love me?” “If you love me,” he says, “keep my commandments” (John 14:15).

And let’s look at one more person . . . the Procurator Pontius Pilate. Back then, the Roman Empire had conquered the land of Israel where Jesus lived, and Pontius Pilate was an official put in charge of that territory. It was ultimately up to him to decide whether Jesus would live or die. Pilate lost control of the crowd. I used to think it was because of his inept leadership that the crowd got unruly and started calling for Jesus’ death. As a leader, I’d like to think that I would have controlled the situation much better. If you’ve ever been in charge of anyone or anything, you know how easy it is to make mistakes or to commit an injustice. Instead of imagining that we would have done better than Pilate, let’s ask how we manage when we are in charge of other people, let’s say a team captain or a student council.

III. People We Should Be Like

As we begin Holy Week and focus intensely on the Lord’s suffering and death, there are three people we should try to be like . . .

One was Simon of Cyrene who helped Jesus carry his Cross. We help Jesus carry his Cross when we carry our own cross every day. Think about the thing you’d most like to change in your life, what makes you unhappy. Accepting that cross and bearing it each day in faith is how we become like Simon.

Another was the repentant thief. This thief understood that he was guilty and that Jesus was innocent. He asked Jesus for forgiveness and a place in his Kingdom. If only I could pray as well as repentant thief. We can, if we make a good, complete confession of our sins in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, hopefully sometime before Easter.

Finally is the blessed Virgin Mary who walked the way of the Cross with her Son Jesus and shared fully in his suffering. Mary is our Mother too and she prays for us all the time. We need to ask her every day to help us to follow her Son. May God bless us and keep us in His love.