

Homily for April 2, 2023 (Passion Sunday)



There is a sentence spoken at the end of that long gospel reading that, in my mind, seems to be misplaced for a couple of reasons. After Jesus breathes his last on the cross, the centurion says, ***“Truly this man was God’s Son!”*** It seems misplaced firstly because this profound truth was not spoken by one of Jesus’ closest followers, that is, by one of the Apostles or one of the women. It was spoken by a soldier, who certainly was not being paid to reflect on theological truths and make public announcements. He was being paid to put criminals to death and make public

examples of them. Secondly, it seems misplaced because saying, “Truly this was God’s Son!” seems like a statement that would come out of the mouth of someone looking at the resurrected Christ as he emerged from the tomb. It appears an unlikely statement by someone looking at the dead Jesus.

Regardless, the centurion speaks the truth about Jesus. What I think he saw was that the resurrection was already at work. Jesus previously told us, in last Sunday’s gospel reading of the raising of Lazarus, “I am the Resurrection.” He didn’t say, “Someday, I’ll become the resurrection.” He said, “I am the Resurrection.”

The Passion story, like the entire gospel, is a story of rejection and the counteroffer of Jesus that never goes away. Why does the counteroffer of Jesus never go away? Because it comes from the world of response and not the world of reaction. In the world of reaction, whatever someone gives to you, good or bad, you give it back to them. If somebody slaps you, you slap them back. If someone invites you to dinner, you invite them in return. Whatever the world gives you, you react in kind. Jesus, says, “What grace is there in that? Even the Gentiles, even those not connected to God, do that much for one another!” Into that tit-for-tat world, the world of reaction, Jesus refuses to enter, especially when others are trying to force him into it. He remains sovereignly free to respond with love, even when he is being pushed into the world of hatred and violence. He remains sovereignly free to respond with forgiveness, even when he is being provoked into the world of vengeance. He never enters into the world of rejection with his own form of rejection but counters it with a love that come from a place much deeper than the knee-jerk reaction world most of us live in, most of the time.

The rejection is that Judas sells Jesus out for 30 pieces of silver. The counteroffer is that Jesus still offers Judas his Body and Blood at the Last Supper with the same freedom he offered himself to the other 11.

The rejection is that Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss in the Garden of Gethsemane. The counteroffer is that Jesus still calls Judas “Friend.”

The rejection is that swords come out and ear is cut off. The counteroffer is, “Put your swords away. Don’t you know that I can easily enter your world of reaction by calling down 12 legions of Angels?”

The rejection is that Jesus is mocked on the Cross three times with “Save yourself, if you’re any kind of a Messiah!” The counteroffer is that Jesus cries out, ***“My God, why have you forsaken me?”*** In other words, “I have arrived, Father, at the most forsaken place of all, and I bring your love even to those who mock me.”

The rejection is that there is a curtain in the Temple meant to separate and block the divine, the holy, from that which is considered unholy. The counteroffer is the destruction of the curtain and the free flow of God’s love into everybody’s life, the worthy and those we consider unworthy.

The rejection is to erect a tomb with a great stone and Roman soldiers guarding its entrance. That should not only silence the message but, more importantly, the messenger. The counteroffer is push of God’s life and love into our world. It is a love that is stronger than death and anything that can entomb us.

The rejection is that he was struck on the back, insulted, spat upon, and had his beard pulled out. The counteroffer was that Jesus did not hide his face from insult and spitting but kept looking at us with the same love with which God looked upon him.

Perhaps that’s what the centurion saw. He saw the counteroffer of God’s love, a love that never once reacted but always responded. Now, it was the centurion’s time to respond as well... “Truly this man was God’s Son!”

Fr. Phil