

Lent Devotion for Friday, April 7

John 18:1-19:42

THE MYSTERY OF THE CRUCIFIXION

“There they crucified him and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them.”

To read of the betrayal and crucifixion of Jesus in John’s Gospel is to be confronted with a dark picture of human frailty and corruption. The swirl of events surrounding Jesus, his betrayal by Judas, his denial by Peter, his general abandonment by the disciples, his accusation by religious teachers, his interrogation by a Roman ruler, his rejection by the crowds, and his mockery and torture by the soldiers. All of these events appear to be the convergence of unrelated acts of human weakness, fickleness, wickedness, and failure. Yet at the center of the storm of tragedy stands Jesus—portrayed as a serene and transcendent witness to truth even in the face of his immanent death, guiltless yet condemned to die.

The great mystery of these events is not that human persons fail, whether well-intentioned like the disciples, or those more indifferent or even malicious like the religious and political leaders. Not only personal experience but even a slight knowledge of human history should keep us from any naïve view of human virtue. Even more naïve would be to think that we would find ourselves on the right side of history had we been among the disciples or the crowds or had we the political power we crave to make a difference.

The great mystery is therefore not why all persons surrounding Jesus in John’s narrative seem to have failed in every respect. The great mystery is, rather, how out of these seemingly confused and even malicious events God brought forth the salvation of the world, bringing ultimate reconciliation out of what could only have appeared to be a pointless death and the final dissolution of Jesus’ life and purpose.

The most shocking thing that John records is not that Jesus was handed over to death, but that underneath what could only appear to be meaningless events, something deeper was at work. On the cross Jesus knew—not in spite of, but because, things had so transpired—that “all things had already been accomplished in order that the Scripture might be fulfilled” (19:28). His final words point to a mystery far deeper than the end of personal suffering in death. They point, rather, to a purpose of divine justification beyond human injustice and death itself. The weakness, fickleness, wickedness, and failure that all of us have displayed and done in our lives. All these things are revealed to be what they are in the crucifixion of Jesus. This revelation should assure our final judgment and condemnation. Yet in some way both profound and marvelous, the death of Christ is not our ultimate condemnation but our salvation (3:16-17), our guilt undone as Jesus cried, “It is finished.” Our love of darkness (1:5) has been overcome by a light and love greater still, for “God so loved the world....” (3:16).

Dear Father, thank you for the salvation you have brought through Jesus Christ our Lord.