

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for your home
April 7, 2019 – Fifth Sunday of Lent
John 8:1-11

Imagine yourself in her place. This is how St. Ignatius Loyola suggests that we read, reflect and pray about the gospels. When meditating on the birth of Jesus, he suggests that we think of ourselves as one of the animals that stood close to the crib. Or take the role of one of the disciples at the Transfiguration on the mountain. And in this Sunday's gospel, put yourself in the sandals of the woman who was on trial before the local religious leaders for committing adultery.

She was facing the possibility of a terrible punishment that was demanded by the law as it was practiced in those days. Death by stoning. Most likely, she was filled with fear, not only facing the possibility of impending death, but also the pain of such a punishment. As is reported, the scribes and Pharisees surrounded her. Jesus was close by and in an attempt to discredit him, they asked his opinion concerning what should be done.

We don't know if the accused woman knew Jesus. All she knew was that this was the most painful moment of her life up to then. She looked at Jesus who was off to the side. He bent down and wrote something on the ground with his finger. He did it twice. She wondered what this was about, these unusual actions of Jesus. Perhaps it was connected with what God had done when writing the original Ten Commandments. It was recorded by Moses that they were inscribed with God's finger on the stone tablets. Was Jesus creating a new law? Perhaps.

The crowd became silent. All eyes were on Jesus, including those of the woman. Jesus addressed them with words most Christians know. "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." She froze as she awaited the first stone to smash into her defenceless body. But none came. She watched as one by one her accusers walked away. Soon she was standing alone with Jesus, the sinless one.

She was now at his mercy. We know what he did next. He likely smiled at her and told her that he would not condemn her. Her heart was pounding as he said to her the most wonderful words she had ever heard. In his view she was forgiven and was free to go, accompanied by the words of Jesus that she should sin no more. Her past was wiped clean. It would be hard to overstate the gratitude she must have felt as she walked away. She would be one of the first of many, including ourselves, who have experienced the forgiveness and mercy of God. In that sense we have all been at one time or another in her sandals.

David M. Thomas, PhD

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April 14, 2019 – Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord
Luke 22:14-23:1-49

The gospels were gradually written based on oral traditions and memories of those who were witnesses to the life and death of Jesus. They recalled his words and deeds. Those who study how the gospels were written agree that the account of the passion and death of Jesus was probably the first part of the gospel to be put into writing.

That's because the death and resurrection of Jesus are the central moments of the life of Jesus. In recalling these events, we are reminded that death is not the final moment of the life of Jesus and our lives. Rather, death is our entrance into eternal life with God. It is a gift from God. We were created not just to live and die, but to live again. That is God's plan. Each year, as we celebrate Holy Week, we are reminded of this amazing truth.

When we hear the passion read each year on Palm Sunday and during Holy Week, we might pay special attention to a few key points. First, Jesus willingly underwent his terribly painful death because he wanted to. He desired to show how much he loved us. He consciously faced the evils of his time, especially that which existed in power-hungry religious and political leaders. Both expressions of power were responsible for his death.

He suffered the death of a common criminal who was not a Roman citizen. His death is described in the gospel in careful detail. It is the only account of a full day in the life of Jesus. All the details are meaningful and can be a source of prayer and meditation for us.

He entered Jerusalem to shouts of "Hosanna," which is what was commonly said during the arrival of significant persons. He shared a Passover meal with his closest followers during which he first washed their feet (a sign of gracious hospitality and service) and then shared his body and blood (which meant his whole being) with them. He then deliberately walked to his execution. He experienced terrible torture before he was led to the hill on which he was crucified. At that time crucifixion was the most painful and humiliating death possible. And as we now say, he did this "for us and for our salvation." No greater love has even been expressed. Again, we say that "he loved us to the end."

Earlier during his life, he said that we are to take up our cross daily and follow him. Doing so contributes mightily to our sanctification and that of the whole world. Central to our faith is a belief that we are created by God and destined to share life with God forever. And our path to that life follows the steps taken by Jesus. This week we are reminded of how steep some of those steps are.

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April 21, 2019 – Easter Sunday of the Resurrection of the Lord
John 20:1-9

Two things are worth noting in today's wonderful Easter gospel.

Number one: The first person to visit the scene of the Resurrection was a woman, Mary of Magdala. Much has been said about this in recent years as we read the deeper messages of the gospels through the sensitivities of women. A woman was the first witness to the Resurrection. Feminine biblical scholars also note that one of the first disciples to bring the good news of Christ to others was the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well. I will let you draw your own conclusions from these biblical facts.

Number two: We are given full details of what Peter and the other disciple (most likely the evangelist John) found at the empty tomb, namely the burial clothes that wrapped the body of Jesus, plus a head covering. The detail is so complete that there is mention that the discarded burial wraps were in separate piles. These details might be thought of as "clues" to what happened. Jesus was truly buried in that stone-covered cave, but he was no longer there. He has risen from the dead! The second phase of the mission of Jesus had begun.

It's also important to know that the Resurrection of Jesus was NOT a resuscitation. Nor was Jesus just asleep, and then woke up. The first Easter was the first day of the NEW CREATION, a phrase used by St. Paul to describe this event. He adds that we might think of Easter as the EIGHTH DAY of creation. So, you might ask, what exactly was new?

The risen humanity of Jesus. The same humanity that began with the Incarnation when Mary agreed to be the mother of the Messiah. The same humanity that truly died on the cross on Good Friday. The same humanity was historically transformed on Easter, made anew through the power of God's creative Spirit. If we ask, "Has there been anything new created on the face of the earth?" One answer would be, "Yes, the risen Christ!"

That's what continued to happen to you and me when we were baptized. Through water and the Spirit, we were "newly made" and became part of the RISEN Christ. That's why the Easter liturgy includes the blessing of baptismal water. God's continuing creation, or as St. Paul writes, God's new creation, develops year after year through us and in us. When we proclaim that we are the Body of Christ, we are not just speaking metaphorically or poetically or spiritually. We REALLY are living cells of the risen body of Christ. Sometimes we may actually act as if we really believed it!

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April 28, 2019 – Second Sunday of Easter
John 20:19-31

I love this gospel because it always makes me smile. John's gospel sets the scene. The disciples of Jesus are in a locked room. No one is allowed entry because, let's face it, the disciples were afraid. Days before, their leader was arrested, tried and condemned to a terrible death. When political forces go after anyone, after they have taken out the leader, they often turn their attention to those closely associated with him. Historians report that the Romans killed thousands of suspected enemies in their occupied territories. And they also report that Jews were often their target.

So, for good reason the door to that room was firmly locked and the room's occupants were mighty scared. Then suddenly, Jesus is there with them. There was no fanfare, no warning, and mostly, no expectation that he would suddenly appear. When he appeared and greeted them with the words, "Peace be with you," I would not be surprised that the fear-level among them went through the ceiling. We have no record of any of those gathered passing out with increased fright, but it would not be surprising if that happened.

John reports that Jesus came to assure them first, that he was risen from the dead, and second, that God's Spirit would enter them and they would be the ones to continue the work of Jesus. While not obvious, perhaps, is that ALL who were in the room at the time, which must have included a variety of men and women, were given the charge of continuing God's involvement in human history that was begun with Jesus. Not some. All!

A secondary point is made about the absence and later presence of one of my favorites, Thomas. (No biological connection with me but hopefully we are directed by the same Spirit.) He serves an important role in the post-Easter events. He wants a certain kind of proof that the risen Christ is who he says he is, the one who was crucified. We know the scene and the evidence that he receives. He is then convinced. This is no hoax.

Further, John adds that blessed too are those who come later and don't actually see Christ as did his first disciples. John's gospel is the last one written. Scholars date it close to the year 100. So, the first listeners or readers of this gospel would be more than a half-century removed from the events described. John didn't want them to feel second-class. They too are blessed in their faith and hope in Jesus and all that was accomplished by him. And in the work that they did to live the gospel truths and spread its message to the ends of the earth.

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