

Matthew 21:1-11

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalm 31:9-16

Philippians 2:5-11

Matthew 26:36—27:66

As I read the passion narrative this week preparing for today, for the first time I really was struck by Jesus going to pray in the garden *three times*. I think I had always thought of it as a lovely Triune sort of thing, going to pray three times. But Jesus went and prayed by Himself frequently, and we don't normally hear of it described in three separate segments. For the first time I really realized that the reason there are three separate times of prayer in the passion gospel is because Jesus keeps going back to His disciples.

He keeps going to them, and suffering disappointment that they are asleep. It seems that He goes to them for company. For companionship in this terrible moment for Him of trial and of fear – anxiety over what He knows is about to happen. He seeks out His friends, and He finds that He is awake all alone.

This is the story that inspires the vigil we keep overnight in the church on Maundy Thursday, with people coming throughout the whole night to “keep awake but one hour” with Jesus. We stay with Him in vigil through that long night in which He was arrested and about to be condemned to death.

But the whole of this week – Holy Week, the central week of the Christian year, the week that tells the story of our redemption – this whole week is a time for us to watch and walk with Jesus. We accompany Him in our liturgy through the Last Supper and the Garden of Gethsemane. Through His arrest, trial, and the Way of the Cross. Through His suffering and death. To the Resurrection.

We share in the triumph and joy of His entrance into Jerusalem. We share with Him in His sorrow and agony. We walk beside Him in faith as companions, disciples, and friends.

Friends. One of the most astonishing verses for me in St. Matthew's account of the Passion is a verse Jesus speaks to *Judas* after Judas kisses Him. He says, “Friend, do what you are here to do.”

Friend? Is Judas still Jesus' friend in this moment? Is this word a sign of the depth of Judas' betrayal, that he helped condemn his friend to death?

Or could it be a sign of Jesus' mercy? That even at this moment He still names Judas a friend, and has not despaired of him, even though Judas soon will despair of himself?

If Jesus calls Judas a friend in the instant of his betrayal, how much then, He must name each one of us, also, as friends. Not just servants, or disciples. Friends of God.

And the heart of friendship is love. And the story of the suffering and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is so astonishing because in its darkness and even violence, what it is most about is Love.

When I look to the Cross, I see in it the most powerful sign of love that the world has ever known. There is something deep within us that recognizes Love there. It is the reason that one of the most beloved verses of Scripture are these words of Jesus:

“Greater love hath no man than this – that he lay down his life for his friends.”

The Mystery of the Cross is deep. I have often struggled to make sense of how exactly it works. How this suffering and death and rising make peace between God and humanity. How it can reconcile humanity to God – make us one. How this happens is difficult to express, and the Church has actually never taken one official position. There are multiple theories proposed to explain the reconciliation – the *Mystery* of the Atonement.

But one thing has always seemed clear to me when I look at the cross, and that is Jesus’ love. However it works, whatever the Mystery of Redemption is that reconciles man to God in this death and resurrection, the center, the heart of this Mystery, clearly must be Love. What else would lead Jesus to lay down His life like that?

It strikes me that the crowds taunt Jesus saying “If you are the Son of God, come down from the Cross.” Prove who you are, they say, through an act of power. But there is no other moment in Scripture where I see deeper proof of who God is than the Crucifixion. In His staying fixed, suffering, and dying, to that Cross, when He did have the ability, the power to come down, God proves the incomprehensible vastness of His love for us.

This is a love that sets us free. I am convinced that it is the great power that leads to deep holiness, the holiness we see and sense in the great friends of God, the saints of the Church – the saints we commemorate together and the people of particular holiness that each of us has perhaps known in our own lives.

It is not perfectionism that leads to that tangible holiness in a person that is sometimes called “the odor of sanctity”. It is not guilt, or a relentless drive to do more good. Doing good is wonderful, but somehow that is not what we most notice in people of surpassing holiness.

Rather, it is their heart, which has known the immeasurable love of God, and been set free. A heart no longer weighed down by the burden of guilt or self-hatred or a relentless sense of what we “ought” to do. A heart that, instead, is so full of delight and joy in God’s love and mercy for their imperfection, that it overflows into thoughts, words, and deeds of love.

True holiness and the joy of the Gospel is not grounded in the good things we do, or in managing to do more of them. It is grounded in a complete transformation of the spirit in which we do these things. And this week, perhaps more than any other, is a time when God invites us into experiences of profound transformation, through the witnessing and sharing and receiving of His love.

The love that calls us to friendship, to union with God. Calls us to walk beside Him always, and in a special way during this week when we remember the end of Jesus’ mortal life and the beginning of eternal life.

This is a week full of invitations to grace. Invitations to know God’s love more deeply, and be transformed. I invite and urge you to take every opportunity, especially in the Great Three Days of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil, to walk with Christ through the Passion and the Cross to the Empty Tomb, and be transformed by the love we find there.