

April 10, 2009

Good Friday, The Three Hours' Service

Meditation #1: Mark 14:1-11

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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And so we begin. We begin to remember the story of Jesus' passion and death, everything that brought him to the cross: the banality and pettiness of human sin along with its devastating and deathly consequence.

First we meet the chief priests and the scribes. They knew they wanted to get rid of Jesus and kill him. He was rocking the boat, taking on the Temple and its sacrificial system. He was proclaiming the end of days, worrying the Romans, upsetting the equilibrium of the system -- however unjust that may have been for some -- and getting the poor worked up in the process. The chief priests and the scribes were the protectionists of their day. Keep things in balance. Get things back to normal. Get rid of the problem. Close him out. Shut him down. Arrest him and kill him. That is bad enough, but it gets worse. Arrest him and kill him *in secret*, under cover of darkness and in the dead of night. We can't do this thing in the light or his immense popularity combined with our craven actions—all governed by fear but dressed up and rationalized as responsible—will lead to a riot during the festival. And of course we can't have that, can we? If we see ourselves in the chief priests and scribes it is no accident. Aren't they just doing what they feel they must when they have power and influence over others? Oh, the tangled webs we weave.

And then there are those unnamed dinner guests at the house of Simon the leper in Bethany. We know they include a woman who did a gracious and extravagant, if slightly strange thing. She anointed Jesus for burial by pouring costly ointment of nard on his head. The other guests were full of scolding and blaming and rationalizations for their feelings. Again if we are reminded of ourselves when we feel out of sorts and all is not well, then we are getting Mark's point. Have you ever criticized others, especially behind their backs? I suppose we should have expected something dreadful to happen at the house of a leper anyway. Who *are* these people, and why don't they know how to behave? It is offensive for us to be so impoverished and to have to witness unbelievable waste being justified. It is as though in our righteous rage we have just thrown paint on a woman's mink coat or beaten some hapless man who made the mistake of wearing a pinstriped suit in London during the recent G-20 summit. Or fired off a letter to the editor. Our banal little jealousies and hurrumphings and sins turn to

violence so easily, don't they? And today we are seeing unveiled the consequence of sin and all the ways in which we mangle our lives at the expense of one another.

After the authorities and the everyman there is Judas. We are not told anything about Judas' motives for betrayal, for 'handing him over'—maybe he was disgusted by the anointing, thought things had gone too far, wanted to purify the movement and get back to basics-- what ever it was, he sought to betray his friend, the one he loved and the one who loved him. No matter the reason, the consequence is the thing: death for Jesus and condemnation for everyone else involved. Today we are seeing unveiled the consequence of sin and all the ways in which we mangle our lives at the expense of one another.

Last Sunday on my way here I heard the news of a bloody murder somewhere in Washington State and it colored the whole morning for me—the Liturgy of the Palms and the reading of the Passion. You may have heard about it and noticed--or you may have filed it away as yet another of the ghastly string of killings of recent weeks involving guns. In this one a father apparently shot and murdered his five children aged something like five to fifteen, and then shot himself. I wondered at the time what kind of banal sin would lead to such an atrocity. It turned out to be all the stuff that we have already seen in our first reading this afternoon on our way to Calvary. It turns out that the man's wife and mother of the children was having an affair and announced that she was leaving him. The police hoped that the children were asleep when he shot them in their beds in the mobile home where they lived. I rather doubt that was true for all of them. I can't image what it must be like to see your father pointing a gun at you and pulling the trigger. He then apparently drove to somewhere near where his wife was and took his own life. As one officer was quoted as saying: "This was not a tragedy. This was a despicable series of murders." Jealousy, fear of the future, rage and impotence, response to feeling emasculated, loss of control and desire to control, blaming, scolding and an ultimate act of betrayal when a father murders his own children.

I believe that sometimes the cumulative effect of all our betrayals, our little sins, our gossip, our talking about someone behind their back, our jokes, our machinations at the expense of others, our managing anxiety in our relationships by focusing on our children and on and on and on --I believe that all these things add up and some hapless creature or creatures bear the consequences, acting out in the most bloody ways. I'm not excusing that murderous father any more than I am excusing the chief priests and scribes, any more than I am excusing Judas. I'm looking at the banality of sin at the beginning of this story that will end in a bloody death, and I am seeing myself. I am seeing you. And I am inviting you to join me in repentance, the turning of our lives back toward all that is good and true and lovely and hopeful, as a response to the gospel, recognizing our dependence on our victim for grace. I am inviting you to join me in setting aside all those self justifying mechanisms that leave us 'not really so bad', 'only human after all' or even 'innocent of any crime'. I am inviting you to join me in declining to focus on the evil of others: the scribes, the dinner guests, the murderous

father, the animal rights protestor, or even Judas. And instead see ourselves in their actions and grasp in our souls the connection between our banal sins and bloody consequence, a connection that is not strictly cause and effect, but which lead us to recognize our need for redemption and forgiveness, once again resolving to live towards the real life of the party, the life of the story: the extraordinary and beautiful extravagant generosity of the woman and the integrity of Jesus who knows that death will be the consequence of a life that triggers discomfort in those about him, but which is really the only way to love.