

Good Friday

April 14, 2017

Isa 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22; Heb 10:16-25; John 18:1-19:42

In the Name of the One Holy and Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

We humans like power. This does not mean that all of us have a desire to wield power unfairly over others. But it does mean that we do not particularly like to be powerless. I hate finding myself in situations where I have little control over the circumstances and, I try to avoid such situations. But there are times we may all have to face in our lives when we feel quite helpless and powerless.

Maybe you have found yourself facing an assignment or exam as a student that you thought was beyond your ability to complete, or something similar in your work environment. Or perhaps you have felt a sense of helplessness as you watched a loved one suffer and die from a terminal illness.

I can only imagine and perhaps you can too, the sense of helplessness the followers of Jesus must have felt as His passion unfolded before them. They were relegated to spectators as they watched their Lord mocked and beaten and then dragged off to be crucified. They were completely powerless to do anything to stop it from happening.

So, who did hold the power for those 15 or so hours from the arrest of Jesus through to His death? There are a number of contenders amongst the characters featured in this passion narrative. The followers of Jesus were clearly not themselves contenders. I think there are three likely individuals, or groups of people who could lay claim to having power at this time – the crowd, the Roman authorities and the religious leaders. They all had roles to play in this drama and they exerted power in their own way and at different times as the events unfolded.

First, there was the crowd. The crowd had been as an interesting entity throughout the ministry of Jesus. They had been out in force on the day of His triumphal entry into Jerusalem a few days earlier, shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who come in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”

The popularity Jesus enjoyed with the crowd was the main reason why He was not arrested earlier. The religious leaders feared the crowd and their response. They had to plan the arrest and trial of Jesus extremely carefully to avoid a revolt. But the crowd turned, or was it now a different group of people than those who were present on Palm Sunday or when Jesus was conducting His miracles.

And there is no doubting the power the crowd had when it came to determining the verdict Pilate would eventually give. Their united cry calling for the crucifixion of Jesus was irresistible. The mob mentality was truly in force on that day. But despite the obvious strength in numbers the crowd possessed, it remained a largely faceless and formless entity. It could be manipulated and dispersed as easily as it could be gathered. The Good Friday crowd was a tool to be used, but the real power lay elsewhere. Someone else was pulling the strings.

Second, there is Pilate and the Roman soldiers under his command. No one would argue that the Roman Empire was the supreme secular authority of the day. They controlled

Palestine and had the physical resources to enforce their rule. It was before Pilate that Jesus was brought for a decision to be made. The fate of the day seemed to rest in his hands. Pilate even told Jesus: “Do you not know that I have power to free you, and power to crucify you?”

But did he have that power? We are told that after speaking with Jesus Pilate tried to set Him free. But he could not. He had to wash his hands of the responsibility and was compelled to hand Jesus over to be crucified.

Thirdly, we come to the religious leaders. This is where the real power seemed to lie. They were the ones that arranged for the arrest of Jesus. They had the ability to put Him on trial and pronounce Him guilty despite the lack of evidence against Him. They successfully manipulated the crowd and placed Pilate in an untenable position. They were the ones who seemed to get their way that day. But even their power had its limits. The fact they had to steal Jesus away and try Him hurriedly in the dead of night demonstrated their lack of power. And having made their judgment they had no power to carry it out. They were dependent on Pilate, for they told him, “We have no right to execute anyone.”

And once the religious leaders had their way, there was a little byplay of power that occurred. Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate “Do not write ‘King of the Jews’, but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews.” Pilate answered, “What I have written, I have written.”

So, there were all sorts of competing powers evident that day and none of them appeared to hold complete sway. It was almost like a game of chess with moves and counter moves as each side manipulated their respective pawns.

And at the center of it all was Jesus. I have deliberately avoided saying too much about Jesus and His power – or lack of it. But I would argue that amidst all these power games, it was Jesus who demonstrated the most power.

At His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was not found cowering in fear. When the detachment of soldiers arrived, Jesus went out to meet them. He commanded Peter to put His sword away and gave Himself up. Even as He was about to be seized He remained true to His calling, taking the time to heal Malchus, the servant of the high priest who had his ear cut off in the struggle.

At His trial before the high priest and before Pilate, Jesus maintained His dignity. Even though Pilate was the undisputed secular authority of the region, Jesus spoke with him as, at the very least, his equal.

Jesus endured all the abuses of power inflicted on Him, fulfilling the role of the suffering servant, as foretold by the prophet Isaiah: “he was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.”

The words Jesus spoke from the cross and His demeanor on the cross again bore witness to His power. One of the criminals crucified with Him sought his salvation from Jesus, asking to be remembered by Him when He came into His kingdom. You do not entrust your life to someone you think is powerless to help. When the time came for Jesus to die,

He could utter in triumph with His last breath, “it is finished.” Then He bowed His head and gave up His spirit.

Throughout His passion Jesus showed us that it is not just the power you have; it is also about what you do with it. Amidst all those vying for power, Jesus chose to withhold His and as a result, He suffered and died. He did this to break the power of sin and death. You see, He was wrestling with far greater powers that day than the temporary ones that were being fought out around Him.

Jesus was not fighting against the religious leaders, the Roman authorities or the crowd. He was fighting for them. He was fighting for us all. As the prophet Isaiah foretold, “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows...he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”

In reality, all the characters of the passion narrative were spectators that Good Friday. For we are all powerless in the face of sin and death. All of us except Jesus. Jesus knew what needed to be done and He did it. That is where the true power lay on Good Friday – in the hands of our Lord Jesus Christ who surrendered to the cross and willingly died for us all.

Amen.