

Good Friday – April 10, 2020 Cycle A

As I wrote in my message for Maundy Thursday, God’s love “scandalizes” us – especially love as made visible in Jesus, who on the night before his death humbled himself by washing his disciples’ feet. In our society we really don’t have an intuitive understanding of this act. Our roads are paved (mostly!) and have efficient drainage. We travel in enclosed motorized vehicles that deliver us from place to place without ever needing to step into the dirt. Not so at all in Jesus’ time. When people traveled from place to place, they got dirty. Jesus walked all over Galilee and Palestine. When he and the disciples gathered for their meal on Maundy Thursday their sandals and feet were covered with the “dirt” of the road. For Jesus, as leader and teacher, to kneel down and willingly wash this grime from his own disciples’ feet shocked them. That he subsequently asked them (and us) to similarly humble ourselves and serve others we find “scandalous”. Far more scandalous is what human beings did to Jesus in the hours after washing his disciples’ feet!

As I’ve said before, everything that happened to Jesus after he went out to the garden to pray was outside the Law. He was betrayed by one sworn to follow him. Jesus was arrested in the dead of night – far away from the public “eye”, that there be no witness to what transpired. Instead of a formal trial, Jesus was drug before and interrogated by two “high priests”. By Law there should have been only one – a lifetime appointment from the Sanhedrin and not the Roman governor. During his interrogation, Jesus was struck by the “police”, another violation of the Law, simply for defending himself: pointing out that if anyone wanted to challenge his teaching they could have done so easily in the synagogues or on the temple steps – where such discussions normally take place! Next, Jesus – a Jew – was taken by the Jewish leadership, who had full authority to judge him in matters pertaining to Jewish religious law, for judgement by the Roman governor – a Gentile! After yet another interrogation, Pilate announced that “he could find no case against” Jesus, yet had him whipped and humiliated before the gathered mob! Then after announcing two more times that he could find no basis on which to condemn Jesus, Pilate ordered him crucified! This decision was Pilate’s “way around” the mob’s implied threat: they would denounce Pilate to the emperor if he spared someone who set himself up as a rival to Caesar! Why had all this happened? Simply because Jesus, in his life and ministry, dared testify to the truth – of our sin, the lawless behavior of appointed leaders, and God’s offer of forgiveness for all who repent!

Yet, it must be admitted that there was “a hint” of validity in the charges against Jesus. Jesus did speak about the establishment of a new Kingdom of which he was the rightful king. The Kingdom Jesus spoke of, however, was not a “rival” to Rome. God’s Kingdom is instead the antithesis of the Empire. Rome was founded and kept in place by the force of arms; its “peace” the silence of the tomb. Rome’s leaders were corrupt; gaining office through bribery, deceit, and murder. Its “economy” was based on conquering its neighbors and enslaving their populations. Only Roman “citizens” had any legal protections. “Neighbors” were just people to be exploited, not loved or cared for. Roman “justice” was handed out by men like Pilate, who were more interested in

maintaining their power and position than doing the “right” thing. When Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?”, he was not trying to start a philosophical discussion; it was a statement of sheer sarcasm! “Truth? Truth is what we Romans deem it to be!” Pilate didn’t utter these words, but that’s what he meant. He was just confused by Jesus’ reluctance to “play along” in an effort to save his life. Not that Pilate cared; he just had no love for the Jewish leadership. He didn’t want to be part of “their mess” and was likely angry at them for getting him involved. Rome liked quiet and passive provinces. Palestine was neither. It was why a man like Pilate had been sent there in the first place! It was why the mob “turned” on Jesus – who advocated for love and the reconciliation of neighbor with neighbor; who rejected violence as “a justified” means to any end.

Scandal? As I said, everything that happened to Jesus after he went to the garden to pray was a scandal of the “highest order”. Why did it happen? Because the self-important leaders of Jerusalem were “hell-bent” towards any action which preserved their power and position. We can hear it in the chief priests’ own words, “We have no king but the emperor”! On any other day these men would have gladly expressed their hatred of Rome and its emperor. On this day, to secure a “victory” and suppress the truth Jesus proclaimed, they willingly allied themselves with the empire of evil.

With unimaginable humility, Jesus came into the world to free us from sin and darkness. He did this, not because any of us deserve rescue, but purely because of God’s love, God’s desire to breathe life back into people chained to the “millstone” of death. The author of 1John wrote that “God is love”, and this is certainly true. God is the Author and Inventor of Love – sacrificial, self-giving Love. Jesus is the embodiment of God’s love in the world. His life and death are proof for any who do not refuse to see. The ultimate scandal is that during his lifetime human beings did not recognize Jesus for Who He Truly Is – God’s Beloved Son, sent for our well-being! He had to die on the cross and be raised from the dead before our eyes were finally opened! It was and is a truly terrible scandal. Knowing all of this ahead of time, in unimaginable love, Jesus humbled himself for our sake anyway. Amen