

Framing

Saint Paul's Cathedral, San Diego
Palm/Passion Sunday; March 28, 2010
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Gracious God,

Let these words be more than words and give us the spirit of Jesus. Amen.

“Framing” was a term frequently used in political discourse just a few years ago. One of our dominant political parties was thought to be more expert at framing than the other. They seemed to have the ability to simplify complex issues and create campaign themes that voters could grasp immediately and viscerally. The other party, so the argument went, got bogged down in nuance, detail, endless wrangling. I'll leave it to you to figure out which party is which.

A reconsideration of framing is a good way to approach this week. It works on multiple levels. Today, for instance, we start with joy (the festive parade) and end in violence (the grim details of the crucifixion). Later this week we'll flip that and start with violence (the Passion Gospel, heard again on Good Friday) only to end in joy (the empty tomb of Easter). So this is the primary frame of Holy Week – joy to death, death to joy. And, while here, let's recall what is contained within that frame: the cleansing of the temple of the money-changers, the Last Supper, agonized prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, his arrest and trial. So we have righteous rage, the most humble service, and the prayerful clinging to hope in the midst of dread.

Now, marking that, let's take the notion of framing to another level. Jesus is willing to undergo all of the events that we now refer to as Holy Week because he's desperately trying to exchange one frame for another. The dominant frame of his day had to do with dominance. Everybody got it. Everyone knew the set-up: the strong ruled the weak, the rich ruled the poor, Romans ruled Israelites, the literate ruled the illiterate, the so-called pure ruled the so-called impure, religious leaders ruled religious followers. All of that was backed up by the threat of violence and those on top received far, far more than their fair share of God's abundance.

Jesus, however, believed that dominance was demonic – and he was ready to act on that belief. He rode into Jerusalem determined to flip the frame, challenging the Empire and their collaborators, and taking on the religious elite by extolling the poor in spirit (not the great), the gentle (not the brutal), those who mourned (not the falsely festive), those who yearned for justice (not those who profited from injustice), the merciful (not the punitive), the pure in heart (not the corrupt), peacemakers (not the violent), those who, like him, were willing to be persecuted for the sake of love (not those who persecuted others in their quest for gain).

These were strong campaign themes for the underclass, for those who had been dominated for far too long and who were ready for salvation, in any form that took. Many came closer, drawn to the warmth of his love and to the heat of his message. Some even accompanied him to the great city and through the gates, hailing him as their new king. The old king, of course, took exception. The domination machine revved up,

sucked him in, and, in a matter of days, spit him out again – as dead as every other prophet who dared to enact God’s dream.

And that’s where our lessons leave it today. That is not where God will leave it one week hence. In the meantime, during the week that lies before us, we might ask ourselves which frame pertains even now – did the domination system dispel the troublemaker effectively or has his message spread over these two thousand years in ways that actually bring us closer to the kingdom of God? The case could be argued either way.

I choose to believe that the world is wildly and wonderfully different because of him. I don’t argue the case from the perspective of history or hagiography. Our history is ambiguous and the heroic feats of the saints seem beyond most of us. I would simply suggest that millions of hearts have been softened over the centuries in direct response to his biblical witness and his continuing presence. Our frame of reference is forever different because of him. Many are more loving, more charitable, more merciful, wiser, because they heed his voice, or at least they try to. Granted, that’s hard to measure and assess. Much of this softening and reframing is hidden from the world’s view; it doesn’t make it into the news or the newspaper or the e-bulletin. It happens in quiet, subtle ways. And this, I’m guessing, is exactly as God prefers it.

Henri Nouwen, the late priest and author, concurs. He writes, “The initial reaction of someone who has a really personal encounter with Jesus is not to start shouting it from the rooftops, but to dwell secretly in the presence of God... the greater part of God’s work in the world may go unnoticed... the greatest part of God’s work in our history could well remain completely unknown... Jesus makes himself known to you in secret, (he) requires that you start looking for him in your own seclusion. It is *his* seclusion, *his* hiddenness, that invites you to enter into your own.”

Perhaps that’s the work that God wants to continue in your life this week. Perhaps God wants to call you out of the rush and fever of life and into a quiet, hidden place. Perhaps God wants to readjust your frame as we, once again, meet Jesus silently, wash the feet of our neighbor lovingly, recline at table with our Lord faithfully, kneel at the foot of his cross repentantly, and then stand before his empty tomb wonderingly.

Seen from the outside, Holy Week appears to be very dramatic and very public but this, I’m suggesting, could be the quiet, sacred labor of your next six days. If it is, we invite you to it in the Spirit of the One who moves from joy to death and from death to joy. I pray that I’ve said these things to you in his most holy Name. Amen.

