

April 5, 2020

For most of my adult life the two gospels of today's Mass have been as huge puzzle to me. I have honestly never really accepted the idea that things in Jesus' life could change so quickly. That he could go from the crowds shouting in adulation of him to the very same people making up the mob that was baying for his blood just five days later. It has always seemed to me just too incredible that things could change that quickly.

Of course, I no longer feel that way.

Our current situation is an example of how the whole world can change in almost a nanosecond and the cause can be the tiniest thing on the planet: a virus.

For me, as it probably is for everyone else, this change and its far-reaching and ever-evolving effects on our individual and communal lives have been shocking, unsettling, scary, depressing, anxiety-provoking, overwhelming, and have probably brought up a dozen other emotions (sometimes in the course of just a few minutes) that I often struggle to not just name but even to identify within myself.

On top of what I have experienced directly myself, I have seen some of the most competent and self-assured people I have ever met—professionals, parents, spouses, children, medical personnel, first responders, service personnel and clergy, to name but a few—pushed to frustration, nervous exhaustion, and often to anger and tears by the overwhelming demands of just trying to cope with their responsibilities in this constantly changing and unpredictable environment.

I'm not afraid to admit that there have been times over the last few weeks that I have said my own version of the response to today's psalm: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me and us?"

And, of course, these are almost exactly the words that Jesus says on the cross right before he dies in today's passion gospel.

Most of the time when I preach on these words, I remind people that Jesus is praying. That he is using a line from one of the great prayers of the Bible, from the Book of Psalms—the prayer-book of God's people.

And I usually remind people how that psalm, as we heard it today continues and ends: That God is not far from us in the midst of our affliction and that we are

called in that very moment to have greater trust in his saving and healing compassion and love.

But this past week, as our COVID nightmare and the problems it has created for us, how it has upended our lives in a most profound way, have just seemed to grow and deepen, it has been harder and harder for me to pray the last part of the psalm with the same confidence and trust I once had.

I have had to look a lot harder and in very new and often very uncomfortable way to see the signs of God's loving presence.

One of the things that helped me do this was looking back on my homily from last week. In it I talked about all the ways that people in our community are helping each other, finding new ways to make sure that other people (especially the most vulnerable) have the basic necessities, new ways to connect with family and friends, new ways to continue, working, teaching, learning, living a family and social life; basically, new ways to cope with the uncertainty we've been plunged into.

I have been especially helped to see those slivers of light that I talked about last week by the way we have coped with our current reality without turning in on ourselves.

None of us would have chosen to be in the situation we are in today, and yet, even though it's forced on us, we are helping each other in our need.

As I reflected on that this week, one character in today's passion gospel kept popping into my mind: Simon the Cyrenian. In the almost two chapters of this long passion of Jesus, Simon gets just one sentence:

“As they were going out, they met a Cyrenian named Simon;
this man they pressed into service
to carry his cross.”

What really strikes me about this line is that it seems to sum up our current situation: We have been pressed into service of one another by the situation we find ourselves in. We did not choose to be in it and yet we are reaching out to one another, not turning in on ourselves.

Unlike Simon, we don't have soldiers with spears, swords and whips “pressing” us to carry each other's crosses. We are doing it because of our sense of being in this together, our sense that it is only together, only by looking out for each other as well as ourselves, that we can get through this.

Whether we are diligently isolating ourselves at home, practicing social distancing and covering our mouths and noses when we're out for our essential trips, reaching out to neighbors, donating medical equipment, delivering groceries and other necessities, or whatever else we are doing, each of us is choosing to be part of the solution to the problems that has been forced on us.

Like Simon of Cyrene, we have been pressed into the service of one another and our entire human family.

Unlike Simon, we are choosing to accept that responsibility because we know that we depend on each other to get through this.

The more I thought about Simon as this past week progressed, the more I was able to see the ways in which I could move from the words of abandonment in the psalm to the words of hope.

Seeing how so many people have chosen to help others in the midst of the crisis that has been pressed onto us, I find I can now move with less difficulty, though it's still not easy by any means, from the part of the psalm that Jesus uses to the prayer of profound trust in God's willingness to hear our prayers and come to our aid.

With our current situation, it's easy to get stuck thinking that God has abandoned or forsaken us.

But I invite each one of you watching and listening to me right now to look at all the ways in which we are helping each other carry this burden that has been pressed on us.

As we look at those signs of hope, let's be more confident that God who loves us beyond measure will heal our broken world as we pray in the plural, not just in the singular, those other words of the psalm:

“But you, O LORD, be not far from us;
O our help, hasten to aid us.”

Prayer of the Faithful
April 5, 2020

Priest: Trusting that God is our help in even the most difficult and uncertain time, we now offer our petitions, confident that He will never abandon us.

Reader:

1. That the church and her ministers and people will continue to serve those in greatest need even in these most difficult times, we pray to the Lord.
2. That God will inspire the minds and direct the actions of those in government so that our current crisis may come to a swift end, we pray to the Lord.
3. That all medical personnel, first responders, and others working in essential positions and services may be kept safe and healthy, we pray to the Lord.
4. That each of us will be diligent in following the best practices for protecting ourselves and others from infection, we pray to the Lord.
5. That those who have contracted the coronavirus may recover quickly and fully, we pray to the Lord.
6. That all who have died recently, especially virus victims, Monsignor Gerry Fahey of the Diocese of Santa Rosa, Bud Huss of St. Apollinaris Parish, and all our deceased relatives and friends may have eternal happiness in God's Kingdom, we pray to the Lord.
7. For all the people of our parish, for the intentions in our book of intentions, and for the intentions that we now call to mind in the silence of our hearts...(pause), we pray to the Lord.

Priest: O God, protector of all who hope in you, bless your people, keep them safe, defend them, prepare them, that, free from sin and safe from the enemy, they may persevere always in your love. Through Christ our Lord.