

Philippians 2:5-11 The Example
Mark 14:27-31
March 28, 2021

The scene at the Last Supper when Jesus confronts the disciples about their impending failure stands as an alert to each of us of the chasm between our naively optimistic self-analysis and the reality of our inner lives. That is to say, we think more highly of ourselves than we ought, and that optimism is exposed when the chips are down and the going gets tough.

We all know that the circumstances for Jesus and his followers involved a high-stakes drama. The chips were down. The tension was high in Jerusalem that Passover upon the expectation that something was going to go down, there would be a rebellion of sorts and Jesus would be the leader of it. Hopes were high for the restoration to power of the ancient Davidic dynasty, even though hindsight revealed these hopes to be pretty much unfounded.

The scene at the Last Supper took place the evening before it was all supposed to happen, and what Jesus told them was,

“You will all fall away.”

These could not have been easy words to hear, given how they all felt, and they are not easy words for any of us to hear. Of course, they did not envision the failure of whatever plans they thought were in place

and about to be executed. They certainly did not know, when it all fell apart, how easily it would be for them to disappear from the scene.

I have often wondered what I would have done. My guess is that I wouldn't have gotten as far as they did. It was Peter, of course, who spoke up, at least before any of the others, “even if everyone else falls away, I will not.”

I am reminded of the scene near the beginning of “Gone With the Wind” in which all the men are in the library smoking cigars and envisioning their future success in the war. “One southerner can lick twenty yankees,” they boasted. What a hollow boast it was. So was Peter's.

I suppose this arrogance is mostly related to a general ignorance of human nature and the unwillingness to acknowledge weakness in the face of trouble. In the end they all agreed they would never abandon Jesus. And then they all abandoned him.

Part of what Lent compels us to do is to face down these hidden realities about ourselves. That is the importance of considering a text like this one on Palm Sunday, the day we observe the ironic triumph of the arrival of Jesus into Jerusalem for that fateful Passover. Never have so many hopeful fantasies turned out to be so unfounded as in this moment.

It is not a surprise then, that the epistle reading for the day is the great hymn of Philippians 2 in which Paul

exhorts us to follow the example of Christ, who humbled himself not only by becoming a human being in the first place, but also by his willingness to die, and not only an ordinary death, but a humiliating one at that. The character trait for the day is humility, and Christ is the supreme example of what it means to be humble.

Lord knows we are not much good at it. Between the times one can't muster up even a sense of our own vulnerability and the times we go too far in the other direction with a false humility that denies our precious value, we often end up on a roller coaster ride that vacillates between two extremes, arrogance and pride on the one hand, and "poor poor pitiful me" self-pity on the other.

Neither is in any way healthy. Let me say two things about true humility. One is that it is never focused on the self. As long as we are obsessed (I thought about choosing another word, but decided to go ahead, nothing fits better) with ourselves and our own situation, we are not, and cannot be humble.

The other is that humility always involves seeing the situation true, even seeing ourselves true. That is, we see ourselves in the accurate relation both to God, and to the world around us, all the other people.

When it comes to God, we are best silent. God is beyond us, over us, within us. When it comes to others, we are neither inferior nor superior. Humility allows to so see ourselves and others true and also to

see both as a part of a community, not only of believers, but of human beings. Our responsibility is to serve, to help, to live, to sacrifice, towards the greater good of the community.

It is not possible to observe Lent and fail to speak of sacrifice as a way of life. I assume that is why the tradition emerged of "giving up something" for Lent. And our example is Jesus, which means that, in following Jesus, we too will embrace sacrifice as he did.

"Have this mind among you," is the way Paul put it. Palm Sunday is bittersweet and ironic. We hear the sound of triumph in its Hosannas, but know it is only an empty triumph, with no more power than the winning of a medal or an election, no more ability to change the world for the better than a mere compliment paid to a celebrity by adoring fans. It was an empty victory. The true victory came on Friday with the sacrifice.

Let us be aware of the example we are meant to follow as we move towards the Good Friday of our lives.

Amen.

[Back](#)

[Home](#)