

Lenten Devotionals – 2018

Monday, March 26

Gentle Strength

Reading: Isaiah 42:1-9

“a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.”

Hundreds of years before the birth of Christ, Isaiah predicted the nature of the Messiah’s coming.

On the one hand, *“a bruised reed he will not break and a dimly burning wick he will not quench”*. These metaphors describe Christ’s amazing compassion. He would not break those already broken. He would not snuff out those barely clinging to life. Behind the wealth of Zacchaeus, Jesus discerned a desperately lonely man and so he invited himself for lunch. Behind the bravado of the woman at the well, Jesus sensed a used and broken heart. He was compassionate to the broken while inviting them to healing and challenging them to embrace new life.

On the other hand Jesus’ unadulterated goal was justice. He courageously sacrificed his life to satisfy the justice of God and he fearlessly challenged religious and political leaders who were oppressing the vulnerable. Christ warned that he will return to judge wrongdoing and lift up those who have been victimized.

As we seek to follow Christ we need to pray for his grace, courage and strength. May he help us not to add to the burdens of the broken but love them too much to leave them as they are. May God give us courage to stand up to the sinfulness of those who hurt others, while still reaching out to those who abuse power.

Tuesday, March 27

True Celebrity

Reading: John 12:20-36

“Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

A group of pilgrims in town for the Passover approached Philip for a backstage pass. Jesus’ fame was spreading. Miracles like the raising of Lazarus and feeding the 5000 had made Jesus look like a winner. Today he would be on the cover of Time or Rolling Stone.

This declaration of his exalted reputation, triggers a response from Christ. Now is indeed the time for the Son to be glorified. However it will not be glorified by works of power and deeds that conform to popular desires. It would be glorified by Jesus going to a shameful death. Like a seed buried in the ground, his death and entombment would glorify God and bring new life to the world.

All of this is counter-intuitive, but it is the way the Kingdom of God works. It is wonderful to be able to celebrate the faithfulness of saints like Billy Graham, however true celebrity in the Kingdom often looks ‘unsuccessful’ from the standpoint of the world around us.

If you serve God in a way that gives you no recognition or in fact causes some to react negatively to you, you may have gained glory in heaven. If you quietly bless others who serve God in this way, you may be God’s kind of fan.

If there are supermarkets in heaven, the saints on the cover of the ‘tabloids’ near the cash registers will be of a very different sort than the celebrities we see here on earth right now.

Wednesday, March 28

Lifted Up When Down

Readings: Isaiah 50:4-9a; John 13:21-32

“I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.”

In Isaiah 50, the strong, conscious decision of the Messiah to give himself up to shame and suffering is underscored. God has clearly led him day by day. With the Lord’s help, he will willingly give himself to beating, insults and spitting. He will “set his face like flint” and trust in God who vindicates him.

In John’s gospel, as Jesus stands up to Judas and constrains him to make his choice, Jesus declares, “*Now the Son of Man has been glorified...*” The glorification does not wait for Easter morning. It is true in the midst of all the events of Holy Week. Moment by moment Jesus resists the temptation to abandon God’s plan. At each step, as Christ hears and obeys the Father’s will, he is glorified. It may not be obvious to humans that it is so, but before God it is the case and therefore true.

We too are called to walk by faith and not by sight. As we resist temptation and obey, we shine in the presence of God. Outwardly we may be suffering. People may be putting us down or counting us out. But those outward appearances are not reality.

The reality is that in such situations God is being glorified and we are being glorified before him. Angels are high-fiving. The faithful in God’s presence are cheering.

Around you events may be confusing and the future may look dark. But if you are striving to be faithful, you are walking with Christ in light and victory.

Reading: John 13:1-17; 31-35

“Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”

We tend to view Jesus washing the disciples' feet as a visual teaching moment or active parable. It conveys a powerful metaphor for servant leadership which was repeatedly taught by Christ.

However the first verse of John 13 underscores an even more powerful motive for Christ's action: love.

The Passover was fundamentally a family celebration. It was and is observed in homes and reinforces the faith and cohesion of parents, brothers, sisters, etc. Jesus declared on Maundy Thursday that he had been looking forward to celebrating this Passover with them. It was a family celebration for him and for them; a warm and caring gathering.

But Christ was also torn. The Passover was also a going-away feast. It relived the imminent departure from slavery to life in the Promise land. Similarly, the hour for Christ's departure was nigh. He was returning to the Father and his heavenly home. Where he was going the disciples could not follow, at least for a time. Like a family member about to move away for a country on the other side of the world, this was a going away gathering. It was a bittersweet moment.

Washing the disciples' feet and everything else that went on in the Upper Room was a declaration of faithful love on the part of Jesus for his family – for us. Experience that today and tomorrow as you reflect on Christ's Passion.