

April 14, 2022

Maundy Thursday

John 19:23-30

“Finished”

1. Almost twenty years ago, there was a movie by Mel Gibson titled “The Passion of the Christ.”
  - a. It was controversial for a number of reasons, not least of which for its violence
  - b. Gibson offers an extremely graphic portrayal on screen of the way in which Jesus suffered in the hours leading up to and including his crucifixion.
  - c. The movie created a lot of buzz around the time it was released. As people would go and see it, they’d have almost diametrically opposed views about it.
    - i. Some were deeply impacted by it, and felt their faith grow
    - ii. Others hated it, lamenting the focus on the gory violence
  - d. When the movie premiered, I was not pastoring a congregation, but I felt that I had to watch it because I knew friends and acquaintances were likely to ask me about it and ask my opinion of it.
    - i. I went to see it. I would not recommend it as a film to watch for the sake of Biblical knowledge.
    - ii. Gibson would argue that it was meant to be make us appreciate God’s sacrifice for us more, but I was left feeling more disgusted by the story of violence
2. The thing is, the movie shows something that there is no point denying
  - a. Crucifixion is dehumanizing and brutal.
  - b. Butchering an animal is done more humanely, frankly.
  - c. I imagine Gibson, like others in some Christian circles, wanted the viewer to have a visceral reaction to the violence, and to the fact that Jesus had chosen to suffer, to then have an awakening of faith, prompted then by a sense of some kind of guilt or shame to then say: If Jesus suffered like this for me, then I should become a follower of Jesus.
  - d. What ought to give us pause is that while the gospels certainly mention the suffering of Jesus (and for original audiences they would have been completely aware of the incredible violence of the crucifixion), the gospel writers do not FOCUS on the suffering.
  - e. If today’s gospel reading were the script for a film, the camera would have been focused more time on other people than on Jesus
    - i. First the soldiers
      1. The scene is crude
      2. Think of them as prison guards who just walked a prisoner over to the electric chair, and before strapping him there, they check his pockets for loose change, and they look at his shoes and say “ooh, they’re my size!”
      3. It’s grotesque, and the effect is to focus our attention on this monstrous empire who puts to death innocent people and hires soldiers paid so little that they raffle off hand-me-downs from those crucified.
      4. Our camera lens zooms in on human injustice
    - ii. Then other people come into focus: this time Mary (Jesus’ mother), Mary’s sister and Mary Magdalene, along with the beloved disciple
      1. The gospel of John doesn’t have a birth story of Jesus.

2. It has a cosmic start: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. And the Word was God.”
3. But when we see Mary in this passage,
  - a. we know that’s his mom,
  - b. the woman who carried him for nine months,
  - c. the woman who taught Jesus to walk and talk,
  - d. the woman who fretted as tension threatened her adult son,
  - e. and now the woman who was witnessing the execution of her firstborn.
4. Our hearts break.
5. But she is not alone. Her sister and her friend were there.
6. And then there is “the disciple whom Jesus loved”
7. And from the cross Jesus offers Mary and the disciple a new connection, that of mother and son.
8. Not disowning his mom, but in effect an adoption which makes the beloved disciple (and all of us later disciples) siblings to Jesus
9. The focus was on the continuation of family for Mary and the disciples
- iii. The camera does swing back up to Jesus, who is in the process of dying
  1. Crucifixion is excruciating, and among other things, hanging there made it incredible hard for the victims to breathe.
  2. Yet the author tells us, as if tying loose ends, that Jesus fulfills scripture by saying he was thirsty and the sour wine is offered to him on a branch of hyssop, the same kind of branch used to smear the blood of the Passover lamb on the door frames of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt (Coloe, p. 490)
  3. And having received the wine, Jesus acknowledges this final moment by saying “it is finished” and his tortured body releases the last bits of breath his lungs clung to. Breath is the same word as spirit, so Jesus gives us his spirit.
  4. The focus there was on the ending no one wanted.
3. Jesus died as he lived: focused on love, and on his life in the context of scripture
  - a. On the cross he doesn’t ask for the camera to zoom in on him, though he was crucified in a public area so people would gawk at him as if he were a lynched black man hanging from a tree in the South.
  - b. His words and actions weren’t about him, but about others.
  - c. The whole thing leaves us with an empty pit in our stomach, with the weight of a great in justice.
4. If we’re going to look at the events of Holy Week head on, if we have to look at the cross and Jesus on the cross, at the very least we should pay attention to what the Gospel writer wanted us to see: a teacher who to the very end lived out focused on loving others. His heartbroken friends and family had to wait until Sunday morning to learn that this gruesome spectacle would no be the last word.