

St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church
Keller, Texas
Sermon for April 5, 2020 ~ Palm/Passion Sunday
The Very Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

It is times like these in which there is such distress that people begin to lose hope of any chance of victory. The pain, the anxiety, the sorrow, the physical or mental suffering, the affliction, the trouble life can sometimes be so strong that we feel powerless and defeated. If you are feeling that way, or if you ever have, take heart during this Holy Week in the knowledge that the Savior of us all was well acquainted with distress. We can see that Jesus was faced with numerous distressing situations during his last week:

His entry into Jerusalem where the crowds hailed him as king
The Last Supper where he speaks of his coming suffering
He tells his disciples that one of them will betray him.
The disciples argue over which of them was to be regarded as greatest
Peter is told he will deny Jesus.
He struggles in prayer, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me."
He finds his disciples asleep.
Judas carries out his act of betrayal.
He is falsely accused before Pilate.
Jesus is beaten and mocked by the soldiers.
He is treated with contempt and "gorgeous apparel" is put on him.
The crowd chooses the release of Barabbas - a murderer and insurrectionist - over Jesus.
Jesus is crucified between two criminals, suffering more scoffing, physical abuse, and humiliation.

Any one of these distressing situations would have been enough to defeat most of us. But when the victory Jesus sought to win was threatened, he turned the tables. His distress became the occasion for redemption and liberation!

One way to face distress is to face it squarely, honestly, and realistically.

The denial mechanism in us is so strong that we are tempted to turn away from the truth when it stares us in the face. We avoid "calling a spade a spade." Jesus knew he was going to suffer, so he told those closest to him about it. He knew one of his disciples would deny him and one of them would betray him, so he told them about it. He didn't skirt the truth when he was standing before Pilate. Jesus dealt with the distress he experienced by facing it, squarely, honestly, and realistically. He never pretended that things were going to be easy. He always insisted that the way to face life was through facing death.

There was an Indian village along the bank of a shallow but swift river. The current was so swift that the river could not be crossed without the people being swept off their feet and put in peril of drowning. One day a warring neighboring tribe attacked the village. The villagers were soon fighting with their backs to the swift water and could only escape by crossing the river. They gathered up the youngest, oldest, and weakest members of the tribe. The strong ones placed the weaker ones on their shoulders, and risked wading out into the raging river. They had little choice. Amazingly, they were not swept downstream. The weight of the burdens on their shoulders kept them from losing their footing. With their extra loads

weighing them down, they crossed the swift stream, while their unencumbered enemies were swept away by the current.

There are times when victory requires that we bear our burdens courageously, facing distress squarely, honestly, and realistically, trusting God to help us. When we do, we wade out into the stream, boldly believing more in our mission than in the danger that threatens to sweep us away.

Sometimes the way to face distress is to make a radical choice.

Jesus made his radical choice. He could have walked out of that upper room, filled with fickle friends, and headed out across the Kidron Valley, past the Mt. of Olives and Bethany and traveled back to Nazareth or someplace where nobody even knew him and never have been heard from again. But he didn't. That mission he came to fulfil was so urgent that he made the radical choice to stay there and carry out the plan which God had for him.

I'm reminded of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran Pastor who made the radical choice to live out his piety, his personal faith, through involvement in an effort to stop Adolph Hitler. He was captured and killed for his radical choice. But his testimony that somehow our personal faith has to make a tangible difference in the face of the evils of the world stands today as a source of inspiration to Christians of all theological persuasions.

A colleague of mine tells of an incident when he was serving in a rural parish years ago. A woman in his church had come to his study. She was still working on her grief. Her husband had left the house to work in the field. As he was leaving he accidentally brushed against a hot electric wire and was electrocuted in front of her eyes. The sight of this tragedy and her own helplessness caused her knees to buckle and she collapsed in a faint. She was told my friend, "I don't know how I'm going to make it alone without my husband. I'm 26 years old and I've got three little preschool children to raise and I was do dependent upon him." After a moment's pause, she said, "I know one thing; I've got a choice to make. I can either get bitter or I can get better. And I've come to church because I want to get better." She made a radical choice. It would have been so easy to get bitter. Everyone would have understood. They would have said, "tsk, tsk...poor thing. It's no wonder she's so miserable. A widow at 26." But she chose another way. She came to the church because she preferred to get better.

That's what we all seek in the church, isn't it? To get better. For the church to be a community of hope, healing and hallelujahs. That's why it is so important that we overcome whatever obstacles there may be so that we can be that kind of community where people can come when they make the radical decision to get better instead of getting bitter.

Sometimes the way to deal with distress is through surrender.

The struggle between the human will and the divine will plays a critical role in all of this, doesn't it? In the garden Jesus prayed so hard that drops of blood formed on his brow. He chose to surrender his will to the will of God, which he had discerned was for him to go to the cross, to die, and rise again. That also meant that he had to surrender to the secular authorities around him. In fulfilling God's will for him, the Savior had to submit to the harshest treatment the courts and the law enforcement officials of his day had to offer.

I was in the presence of two people who had this attitude in the face of a terminal illness. I had known her as a girl, the younger sister of one of my very best friends in high school. When I went out to visit her on a Tuesday afternoon, I was struck by how in the photographs in the entry hall she looked so much like she did the last time I saw her, which was at least 25 years before. I visited with her husband who told me how he had fallen in love with her five years ago. Before they married, she told him she had the AIDS virus. He married her anyway. When I went in to visit with her, she was just a skeleton. She didn't look anything like herself. But when she spoke, I recognized the spirit in her. She spoke of her death and my role in planning her funeral in such a matter of fact way. I asked how her faith was and she said, "it's never been stronger." I asked if she was afraid and she said, "oh, I have a little fear from time to time, but it is not fear of death. It is fear of dying and fear for my family and my friends." We had a prayer. I had my eyes closed and my head bowed as I prayed holding one of her hands. When I opened my eyes and looked up, she had the other hand lifted in praise and quietly said, "thank you, Jesus." She was able to surrender to the disease that racked her body because she had so long ago surrendered to the One whose life was laid down for her. The One who said, "because I live, you shall live also. And death shall have no power over you." Debbie died on Thursday of that week and we buried her on Saturday. Her funeral was a celebration of her victory, a victory handed to her by Christ.

Sometimes, the way to victory over the distressing situations life presents to us is through confrontation, sometimes through radical choice, and sometimes through surrender. But in every case, as in the case of Jesus, it is God's grace that undergirds us. We are saved by that grace through the living out of our faith. The grace of God is greater than the distresses we encounter on the way. Whatever our strategy, when we face them as Jesus did, trusting in God's amazing grace, then can we say, "thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."