

Wisdom 2:1, 12-24

Psalm 22:1-11 R: My God, why have you forsaken me?

Philippians 2:5-11

The Passion of Jesus: Luke 22:39-23:56

BETRAYAL

April 6, 2007 Good Friday

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A theme that extends from the beginning of the Bible to the end, from the earliest experience of the Israelites to the persecution of the early church; a theme that is in almost every book of the Bible, in every stage of Israel's history and the history of the church, is the theme of betrayal.

Betrayal is at the heart of the mythical pre-history of ancient Israel in the Garden of Eden. However patriarchal the images of that story, it nonetheless captures an inevitable reality of human life. Human beings cannot live without betraying one another and God. This is evident in the earliest memories of the ancient Israelites: Sarah and Abraham betray Hagar and Ishmael; Abraham betrays Sarah and Isaac, almost killing his own son; Isaac betrays Rebecca, and Rebecca and Jacob betray Isaac; the latter betray Esau. And so it goes throughout Israel's history. In a sense, their story is the story of betrayal.

This theme pervades the Jesus story in a dramatic way. The leaders of traditional Judaism perceived Jesus to betray his tradition, labeling him a "blasphemer." The crowds, so often his admirers, turn on him when he is arrested, clamoring for his death. Pilate abandons any pretense at judicial objectivity and, believing Jesus innocent, turns him over to be tortured and killed. Even Jesus' friends, Judas in one way, Peter in another, the other disciples too, betray him. These multiple betrayals conspire to result in his humiliating, violent, agonizing death.

Like Jesus, we live with the experience of betrayal in many contexts of our lives; in our families of origin, in friendships that end in enmity, in the families we create as adults, in the workplace, in our country and in international events. Some of these betrayals are relatively small and painless. Others are enormous, completely deconstructing our lives, forcing us to start all over again. Betrayal, at

its worst, is worse than death, more painful than death, for those who are left behind.

Most of us have experienced betrayal of some sort as recently as this past year, however great or small. And the reality is, each of us is perceived, by someone, as a betrayer. Betrayal is not defined by the intentions of the betrayer, but by the experience of the one who feels betrayed. If we look at our own words and actions with objectivity and perspective, most of us would admit there have been times in our lives when, directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally, we have betrayed another or caused another to feel betrayed.

This evening, we set aside time to contemplate the tragic consequences of betrayal in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. We let the anguish and the sorrow settle into our souls. We gather in community to remember Jesus and to mourn his loss in this ritual of remembrance. But we grieve more than the death of Jesus. As therapist Barbara Tracer says, when we look upon the cross and venerate it, we venerate not only the memory of Jesus' death, but also that which the image of Jesus, crucified, captures in the deep psychic experience of humanity: The balancing of opposites, the holding in tension of good and evil. In venerating the cross, we allow ourselves to grieve, to enter into grief, not only for Jesus' suffering and death, but for the brokenness of humanity, - brokenness which destines every human being to our own experiences of betrayal, both as betrayed and betrayer. Mourning is necessary. Mourning our inhumanity is a necessary step on the path to greater humanity, a humanity of loving integrity.

If the crucifixion holds good and evil in tension, where is the good? The good is in the person, Jesus, God's beloved, the man of integrity, who, because of his goodness and despite God's love, is crucified. The "good" in the crucifixion is the new understanding of God that it reveals: Just as God never abandoned God's own beloved, the chosen One, the Messiah, God *never* abandons us, no matter how abandoned we feel, no matter how terrible the tragedy, injustice, horror and death. Our God is a god of love who brings us through death to new life.

The spiritual challenge of life is not to live without betrayal, because that is impossible. The spiritual challenge of life is not to live without suffering [though many in our culture dedicate themselves to this goal]. That too is impossible. The spiritual challenge of life is to survive the experience of betrayal better persons than we were before.

In living through betrayal, in enduring the fire of suffering which cannot be avoided, we are refined, purified, strengthened and transformed. We are prepared for resurrection.