



April 2, 2023

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion

"...He emptied himself..."

Philippians 2:7



Dear Friends,

The artist Marc Chagall was born in 1887 in Belarus (part of the Russian Empire) to a Hasidic Jewish family. Determined to become an artist, he moved to Paris where his distinctive style drew on modernist influences and images of his homeland. In response to the Kristallnacht pogrom in Germany in 1938, Chagall painted his "*White Crucifixion*." (This painting is a favorite of Pope Francis) The painting depicted Jesus on the cross, clothed with a Jewish prayer shawl as a loincloth, and he is surrounded by scenes of Jewish persecution.

"*White Crucifixion*" emphasizes the Jewishness of Jesus and relates the crucifixion to the suffering of the Jewish people and the ongoing suffering of humanity. For Chagall, Christ symbolized "*the true type of the Jewish Martyr*." In this time of growing antisemitism (even by Christians) it is important for us to remember the Jewishness of Jesus, his disciples, and the first Christians.

The Gospel of Matthew was written for a Jewish-Christian community who have found themselves excluded from the synagogue. Matthew presents Jesus as the new Moses who has come to liberate the people from sin and death. Jesus is presented as the fulfillment of the Torah and the prophets. But Jesus dies a shameful death, one reserved for only the worst of criminals. Even though Jesus endures his sufferings in the best of his culture's manly tradition, this is all wiped out by the shame of crucifixion. This raises a difficult problem. *If* Jesus were truly beloved of God, why would God allow him to be overcome by his enemies.

But God turns our human way of thinking upside down. By raising Jesus from the dead, God honored Jesus more than anyone ever could. God destroys Jesus's shame. From this point of view the story of Jesus's bitter passion is turned around. The gospel reports shameful things like betrayal, false witnesses, a corrupt judicial process, and bullying, however, a careful reading shows that throughout the story Jesus is in control. He is the master of his fate. He knows that he is right, and God will vindicate him.

Jesus, like every other innocently suffering person in the history of Israel, is absolutely confident that God will make things right. Because of this Jesus is an extraordinary hero. He endures flogging, verbal insults, crowning with thorns, crucifixion and does not cry out. In the passion according to Matthew the only sentence that Jesus speaks is to quote the beginning of Psalm 22, "*My God, why have you forsaken me.*" This is a prayer expressing the suffering of a believer. He prays in response to the taunts he endures!

Following his death the earthquake and other apocalyptic signs tell us that the death of Jesus is the birth pangs of a new world. Pope Francis in a homily said,

"Let us not forget the cross because it is here that the logic of 'failure' is turned upside down. Jesus reminds us all that we can expect trials and rejection, in the end we will see triumph...The story we tell is one that begins with a dream of love. It is a true love story. It ends up looking like a story of failure when Jesus dies, but with the great love of God, Jesus' self-giving love saves us all."

Peace,

Fr Ron

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