

John Chapters 18 & 19

Last night, I promised that over the course of the Triduum, I would expand upon what has become a familiar theme over the past several months: that of being seen, known, and loved by God, and of seeing, knowing, and loving others and ourselves as God does.

My basic premise last night was that Jesus is beautiful inside and out, but often *not* in the way we human beings see it. And because we don't see Jesus clearly, we can begin to see why he was so hated. The perfect union of his humanity and divinity resulted in a person who, metaphorically, held up a mirror to everyone around him. And people didn't like what they saw, so they hated the One who showed them who they really were.

Today, we are going to spend more time looking into the mirror that *John* holds up for us, to see more clearly what sort of creatures God chooses to love. And we see, to our great shock, that God chooses to love the creatures who want to kill him. God chooses to be faithful to the faithless. And this is how Holy Week invites us into the true fullness of Christian life. Being a Christian, being like Christ, means being faithful to the faithless. Being a Christian means loving the loveless, loving the unlovable. It means realizing, in fact, that there is *no such thing* as an unlovable human being in God's sight. Being a Christian means doing our own imperfect best to search for—and to *find*—that perfect love of God in all whom we encounter. Which is not easy.

When it comes to the Jews, John gets a lot of bad press for his linguistic choices, and indeed, Christians have abused John's gospel to justify antisemitism for centuries, right up to our own day. In a recent *Thurible* article, Fr. Shire addresses this ugly fact head-on. But let us look beyond the ways that people have misused the Gospel of John to spread hatred and ugliness. For John's gospel is indeed one of beauty and truth. On the surface level, we see betrayal, denial, torture, death, grief, sadness, tragedy. We see ugly human beings, both the Jewish religious authorities and the Roman secular authorities, doing everything they can to make Jesus himself look as ugly as possible, so ugly as to merit a sentence of death. But on the spiritual level, we see Jesus' undeniable love and glory.

John's aim isn't to show how ugly and perfidious the Jews are, or how ugly and cynical the Romans are, but how ugly and murderous we *all* are. This is the message that is sometimes obscured by John's choice of words. And it is central to our understanding of his gospel: that we all a part of that murderous crowd. So in order to see, know, and love Jesus as he truly is, we first need see how we *fail* to see, know, and love him, just as those who betrayed and crucified him failed to do. Only when we see *ourselves* as among those who mocked and murdered him, only when we recognize that we have no excuses, and that no one is to blame but ourselves—not the Jews, not the Romans, but ourselves—only when we see that *we* are among those who are too often blind to his love and glory, can we learn how to see, know, and love Jesus with the eyes of faith.

What blinds us to that love? I think it comes down to what we see reflected in the mirror. We are blinded by our focus on the imperfections that we see in ourselves and others. We expect that God feels toward us the way we feel toward each other, and toward ourselves. We expect God to be

angry, to be estranged from us, to reject us. We expect God to see the ugly and react accordingly. And we fail to see what God sees, what Jesus saw:

The mirror that John holds up, showing our own ugliness, also reflects the perfect love of God. We might have to squint or look at it sideways, but in the corner of our vision, at the edge of the glass, look, there it is!

We may only be able to see through the glass dimly, but on this most terrible and wonderful of days, we can glimpse the fact that God's love is so perfect, so unthreatened by our ugliness, that there really is nothing we can do to kill God's love. It takes the crucifixion to prove this, because we thought that we had proved our point when we killed Jesus, but as we shall see tomorrow, we only proved God's point that there is no escaping God's love.

Without the eyes of faith, we look into the mirror that Jesus on the cross holds up to us and can only see our own evil. But John wants to help us see that it is in the face of this evil that God demonstrates how far he is willing to go to prove that God truly does see, know, and love us at our worst. And God wants us to know this, not because being evil is just fine. It's not an "I'm OK, you're OK" affirmation of who we are, but a way of shocking us into seeing how no matter how evil we are, we can't make God hate us.

John sees the story of Jesus' arrest, passion, and crucifixion as both tragedy and triumph. As pain and agony, but also as glorification. Jesus' glorification, his victory. In the tragedy of Jesus' death on the cross, if we are looking at it as God sees it, we, too, will see a glorious triumph of love over death.

John shows us the crucifixion in excruciating detail to demonstrate human ugliness in our fallenness, but he doesn't want us to get stuck there, for then we would fail to see, know, and love God's *purposes* in the crucifixion. It is *despite* our ugliness that Jesus uses the cross to demonstrate God's love for us, his enemies. And in using the *worst* we can do to God to show us how much God loves us, Jesus points to the greater truth. Thus we can begin to see, know, and love the crucifixion itself as the triumph of God's love over sin, death, and the grave.

When Jesus shouts out, "It is finished", the tragic reading is to hear that as a cry of agony. But John invites us to hear it spiritually as a shout of victory.

Jesus sees, knows, and loves us even when we don't see, know, or love Jesus. And that is the Gospel according to John: "God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish but have eternal life."

By John's witness, through his testimony, through his eyes, as through Christ's on Maundy Thursday, we learn to look beyond the ugliness that humans commit against God and fix our eyes squarely on the sacrifice that God makes on our behalf. And if we still don't see, know, and love that truth this morning, because we can't see the triumph over the tragedy, God has one more way of showing us. But if we want to see it, we have to show up tomorrow and wait in the dark.