

## Passion (Palm) Sunday

*Christ Jesus emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*      Philippians 2, 6-11

*Peter said, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about." At that very moment, the last word hardly off his lips, a rooster crowed. Just then, the Lord turned and looked at Peter, and Peter remembered what the Master had said to him: "Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.*      Luke 22, 60-62



The events which we relive through the liturgy of the next eight days encapsulate the essence of Christianity. While some would have us subscribe to the view that Christianity is a system of beliefs and practices based on the teachings of Jesus recorded in the New Testament, I would like to suggest that it is essentially about relationship - the relationship we have with Jesus, the one who redeemed us by his death on the Cross, the one who loves us endlessly, who forgives us endlessly and who trusts us to proclaim his message and bring to realization his dream for our broken world. Through baptism, our lives are inextricably bound up with the person of Jesus and our commitment is to live in imitation of him, replicating his love and compassion and forgiveness in the way we relate to all whom we encounter.

One small part of the gospel account of Jesus' final ordeal underlines for me that living as a Christian is essentially about my relationship with the person of Jesus. It is the exchanges that take place between Jesus and Peter immediately after Peter's denial of Jesus and later, when the risen Jesus asks Peter: "Simon, Son of John, do you love me?" (John 21, 15-19) that point to the centrality of honesty, love, forgiveness and acceptance in the new order that Jesus came to establish. Relationship is an integral dimension of all these qualities. They exist only in relationship.

When Jesus looked at Peter after the cock crowed, it was a confronting look that signalled the hurt of being betrayed by a close friend. Peter lied to protect himself and to find acceptance in a group that was totally foreign to all that Jesus stood for. A look from the friend he had betrayed was all that was needed to make Peter realize the gravity of his betrayal. Peter hadn't broken any rules but he had seriously harmed a relationship. All he could do was to run off in shame into the dark of night. Days (or weeks?) later, the relationship was restored with a warm and welcoming question from that same friend: "Simon, Son of John, do you love me?" There was no finger-pointing, no recriminations, no blame. Only forgiveness.

And we're invited to change places with Peter and to ponder the strains we have put on our relationships with that same friend. We, too, have sometimes bought approval from others at the cost of betraying our friendship with Jesus. We have compromised that friendship by actions or omissions of which we are now ashamed. And Jesus has looked at us as he did at Peter, but through the face of a friend or the words of someone who has challenged us or the actions of complete strangers that have alerted us to our own inadequacies and failures. And, as we shed our own tears of regret and shame and repentance, we come to realize that the friend we have betrayed is still close by, ever offering the hand of forgiveness and liberation. "We may be unfaithful but he is always faithful, for there's no way he can be untrue to himself." (2 Timothy 2, 13)

And we, in our turn, through the very act of being forgiven are challenged to reflect the forgiveness of Jesus to others. In this context, I am reminded of a prayer that was pinned by a Jewish woman to the body of a child who had died in Ravensbruck concentration camp. Ravensbruck, you will recall, was a camp where more than 90,000 Jewish women and children died. It was also the camp whose horrors Corrie ten Boom survived to write that powerful story *The Hiding Place*. The prayer pinned to the dead child's body reads:

O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not only remember the suffering they have inflicted on us; remember the fruits we bore, thanks to this suffering: our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, the courage, the generosity, the greatness of heart which have grown out of all this. And when they come to judgment, let all the fruits that we have borne be their forgiveness. (From *Prayer* by Richard Foster)

Corrie herself was a Christian who learned to forgive. After the War, she secured a position as a teacher in Germany. It was during that time that one of the guards from the Ravensbruck camp who had a record of extreme cruelty approached Corrie asking for forgiveness. Writing of this experience in her book, *Tramp for the Lord*, Corrie records her reluctance to forgive him, but prayed that she would be able to do so. She then adds: "For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then." (*Tramp for the Lord*, 1974)

If we are to become the people Christ invites us to be, we have to learn love and compassion. That means "emptying" ourselves of our own wants and needs for the sake of others. It means reaching out to heal hurts and give comfort to those who have lost hope, despite sometimes feeling betrayed ourselves. It means pausing to reflect on how our actions and decisions can impact negatively on others, even when we have the best of intentions. We only become servants of God by serving others.