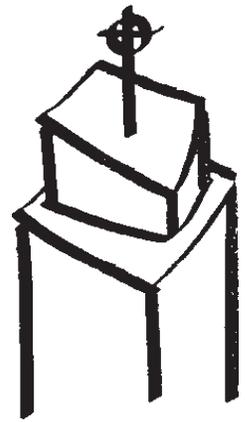


OUR FAMILY



NEWS



For Oblates of St. Bede Abbey, Peru, Illinois

March &
April, 2015

A GOOD FRIDAY REFLECTION

“Behold, the man!...Behold, your king!” (John 19:5.14)

INTRODUCTION

According to St. John the Evangelist, whose account of the passion of Jesus we hear in the liturgy of Good Friday, the centerpiece of the story is the trial of Jesus before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. The preliminaries, his arrest and interrogation by the former high priest Annas, lead up to this dramatic encounter, and what comes afterwards, the crucifixion and related events, follow directly from it. The trial itself is a carefully constructed narrative, arranged, like other passages in the fourth Gospel, in a series of seven scenes that artfully relate to one another and focus the attention of the listener upon the central concern of the evangelist.

As in a drama, these scenes are distinguished by changes of place. Pilate speaks to Jesus repeatedly within the praetorium, the official headquarters of the Roman governor when he was at Jerusalem. He then moves outside to the portable tribunal or judgment seat to report his findings to the accusers of Jesus who are demanding his execution. On two of these journeys outside he brings Jesus with him to face his accusers and each time he makes a pronouncement. The first time, he says, “Behold, the man!”; the second time, “Behold, your king!”

When this gospel passage is proclaimed to us on the very day of Jesus’ suffering and death, it is the Church who makes her own these words of Pontius Pilate, addressing them to us as an invitation to see, to understand, to believe. “Behold, the man!” “Behold, your king!” In these proclamations the evangelist has summed up for our faith the meaning of what happened in that far-off time and place, on that sacred day. Let us reflect on what he is telling us.

“BEHOLD, THE MAN!”

Who was this “man,” whom Pilate so described? He was a prisoner who had just been scourged and mistreated by his captors. The Gospel says, with deceptive simplicity, “Then Pilate took Jesus and had him scourged.” A Roman *flagellatio*, or scourging, was not just a slap on the hand. Roman writers tell us that the *flagellum* was a brutal whip, with several thongs made of stout leather and tipped with metal fragments or with pieces of bone appropriately called *scorpiones*. The prisoner was stripped naked, bent over, and tied to a post. Unlike the Jews, the Romans placed no legal limit on the number of blows. The victim was soon reduced to a mass of welts and bruises and covered

from head to foot with lacerations that disfigured his features and bathed him in blood. Often he fainted and sometimes he died from the procedure.

“Behold, the man!” Could anyone have experienced the reality of our *humanity* more intensely than Jesus? Can we adequately realize the sheer *horror*, the *terror* of his passion? “And they struck him repeatedly.” His physical suffering must have tested the limits of human capacity for endurance. But there was also the even greater injury to his person: the calculated insult, the injustice, the betrayal and abandonment by his friends and supporters, the terrifying aloneness, the violation of his privacy, his sensitivity, his integrity, his body, his very selfhood.

“Behold, the man!” Behold, the human one, who took our nature wholly to himself, who did not flinch from any extreme of pain and suffering, of humiliation and disgrace, of violence and scorn. Such was the cost of recovering our humanity, damaged by sin, and restoring it to what it was intended to be. “Behold, the man,” the very incarnation of our humanity in all its weakness and vulnerability! “Behold, the man!”

“BEHOLD, YOUR KING!”

What kind of cruel pretense can it be, then, for the evangelist now to confer such an exalted title upon this poor remnant of humanity? Yet St. John is never more serious, nor is he merely reporting the mocking irony of Pilate. It is Jesus *as king* who is the central figure of his story. The word “king” occurs no less than twelve times in his narrative. It figures, substantially, in the first question that Pilate asks of Jesus, and it follows him all the way through to the inscription on the cross.

“Behold, your king!” That Jesus claimed to be the Messiah-King idealized in the Old Testament and thus a supposed political pretender was the pretext upon which his enemies based their complaint to the Roman authorities. All the Gospels testify that Pilate questioned him about his being “King of the Jews.” For this reason the soldiers mocked him by dressing him in a purple cloak (purple being the color of royalty), putting the crown of thorns on his head, and greeting him with the words, “Hail, King of the Jews!” But for St. John this is no empty charade; he never even speaks of it as mockery. The Roman soldiers did not realize that their savage mockery was actually an accurate depiction of the reality.



“Behold, your king!” There is a curious expression in St. John’s account that at first sight seems perverse. Whereas the Latin text reads, “Pilate...brought Jesus out and seated himself on the judge’s bench,” the Greek text really is best understood as meaning, “Pilate brought Jesus out and *seated him* on the judge’s bench.” The idea at first seems bizarre, that the governor would seat a bloody, wretched prisoner in a place of honor, until we remember the Johannine irony. John wants to tell us that, without knowing or intending it, Pilate got it right: the real sovereign is not the one who appeared to be such, but the one who seemed to be helplessly in his power. Ironically,

it is exactly right that he should be there, seated on the tribunal, wearing a crown and garbed in royal purple, hearing the ruler of this world proclaim to the Jewish leaders, “Behold, your king!”

“Behold, your king!” It is precisely as *judge* that Jesus sits there before the leaders of Israel. For, in Roman practice, to sit on the tribunal meant precisely to exercise the ruler’s legal prerogative of judging. But the Roman ruler is not really in charge here; it is not just Roman history that is being enacted, but the history of salvation. The Johannine Jesus has often spoken of judgment. “The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son (Jn 5:22).” Now Jesus is ostensibly the one on trial, and his enemies cry out, “Crucify him!”—the ultimate rejection of his word and of himself. But the pagan governor declares him king against their protests, and at this moment the human judgment is passed, though the true Judge sits silent on the bench. The ultimate irony.

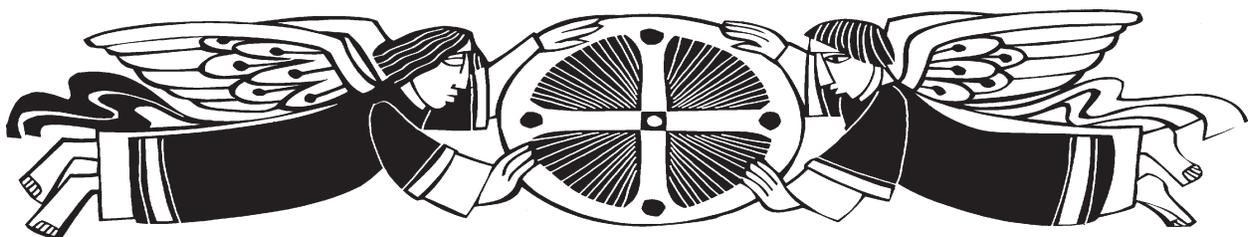
“Behold, your king!” John is careful to note that this happened on the preparation day of Passover, at the sixth hour. This marked the beginning of the observance of the greatest Jewish solemnity, the commemoration of God’s deliverance of his people from bondage. At this solemn moment, Jesus is proclaimed king. It is nothing less than the turning point of human history.

“Behold, your king!” There remains now only the solemn ceremony of his enthronement. This follows immediately in John’s narrative, for in the eyes of the evangelist the cross is the throne of Jesus. If he had been executed under Jewish law, it would have been by stoning, the Mosaic penalty for blasphemy. This was done by throwing the victim from a precipice and then hurling stones down upon him. In this scenario, Jesus would have been *cast down*. But John sees the Roman practice of crucifixion as precisely the opposite: he is *lifted up* instead. Had he not said, “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself (Jn 12:32)”? And had the evangelist not commented, “He said this indicating the kind of death he would die (Jn12:33)”? The governor’s proclamation is realized when the king is raised upon the cross that to the eyes of faith is a throne. It even bears the inscription, again from the pagan who is prescient with prophecy, “Jesus the Nazorean, King of the Jews.”

“Behold, *our* king!” He is king not only of the Jews, but of us all. The man of sorrows has become the everlasting king of the universe. The early Church depicted the cross of Jesus as a *crux gemmata*, shining with jewels and radiating the glory of the risen one. Like the reader who peeks at the last page to learn the identity of the murderer, we know by faith how the story came out. But the evangelist tells us what it *means*. The horrors of Good Friday are but a prelude to the joys of Easter. “The Lord is good to the one who waits for him, to the soul that seeks him. The favors of the Lord are not exhausted, his mercies are not spent; they are renewed each morning, so great is his faithfulness (Lam 3:25.22-23).”

“Behold, the man!” “Behold, your king!”

+ Fr. Claude Peifer, O.S.B.



Our Family News is published in the special interest of the oblates of St. Bede Abbey. Please send changes of address and comments to The Editor, Our Family News, St. Bede Abbey, 24 W US Highway 6, Peru, IL 61354.

We welcome your submissions to this publication, either instructive or reflective, whether prose or poetry. They should in some way relate to the **Rule of Benedict**, Benedictine spirituality, and/or the oblate program. The editor reserves the rights to choose material for publication and to edit as necessary.

SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING MEETINGS

Meetings are held in the abbey church from
1:30 P.M. to 4:30 P.M.

SUNDAY, MARCH 8, 2015

Sunday, April 12, 2015

Sunday, May 3, 2015

Passage for *Lectio* at the March Meeting

Let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith. For the sake of the joy that lay before him he endured the cross, despising its shame, and has taken his seat at the right of the throne of God. Consider how he endured such opposition from sinners, in order that you may not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood.

Hebrews 12:1-4

Passage for *Lectio* at the April Meeting

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all, how will he not also give us everything else along with him? Who will bring a charge against God's chosen ones? It is God who acquits us. Who will condemn? It is Christ Jesus who died, rather, was raised, who also is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. What will separate us from the love of Christ?

Romans 8:31-35



Abbey Prayer Schedule

Visitors are welcome to join the monks for Mass and for the hours of the Divine Office. Conventual Mass is celebrated on the first level of the abbey church, the hours of the Divine Office on the second level. During the school year, the monks' schedule is as follows.

6:00 A.M. Morning Prayer*
12:00 Noon Midday Prayer
5:00 P.M. Conventual Mass**
7:10 P.M. Evening Prayer***

* on Sunday, 7:00 A.M.
** on Sunday, 10:00 A.M. and on Monday, 7:30 A.M.
*** on Sunday, 5:00 P.M.

