

Welcoming the Cross

The first reading today sounds like one of the Psalms that are applied to the story of Christ's passion or like one of the Servant songs in Isaiah. But in reality, it comes from one of the latest books in the Bible, composed not in Hebrew but in Greek, in Alexandria (and not contained in the original Hebrew Bible). The situation of the righteous man who is insulted, tortured, or executed is one that is not confined to special religious texts; it is a situation that arises at all times. So, the passion and death of Jesus, which he predicts to his disciples for the second time today, is not in itself an extraordinary destiny.

Many people suffer worse and longer torture, detained for years in solitary confinement for example, and more painful and degrading deaths. Many are unjustly condemned and never vindicated, unlike Jesus. That Jesus dies as a martyr is again not something absolutely unique. Many people have been prepared to lay down their lives to resist injustice and oppression. What makes the passion of Christ unique is its saving role, expressed a little further on in Mark's Gospel in words that may well come from the lips of the historical Jesus himself: "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45). Some people today find the idea of the death of Jesus as a saving sacrifice, an atonement, to be objectionable, and it is caricatured as showing a cruel God torturing his son in order to avenge himself on humankind. We need to put aside such reaction to let the message of salvation claim our hearts and our minds. Jesus's life befits a Messiah, bringing healing and enlightenment to all. But his death brings salvation to the whole human race. God does not punish but grants healing and salvation to all by allowing his beloved Son to enter so deeply into our suffering, including the suffering people inflict on one another, and including the ultimate failure of death and dishonor. If we embrace the Messiah that God sets before us, we will find also that the divine vindication of this Messiah, who is raised up from death, also becomes credible.

The minds of the disciples are completely elsewhere. The question that bothers them in their discussion is which of them will have the highest place in the Kingdom. It even gives rise to a quarrel. It is easy to laugh at them, but the laugh is on us. Called to follow Christ, we worry about tiny advantages and securities as if Christ never was. Jesus appeals to the disciples' ambition: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Indeed, Jesus often appeals to our low level of thinking to inspire us with the ambition of imitating him, who came "not to be served, but to serve" (Mk 10:45).

“Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’” Today a wave of refugees sweeps across Europe. When we welcome these children we welcome the Son of Man, who had “nowhere to lay his head” (Mt 8:20; Lk 9:58), and in welcoming him we are welcoming God back into our desiccated lives. To welcome the suffering multitudes is also to welcome the Cross, and to discover its saving power, first shown in the community of love that it creates.