

Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday
April 5, 2020

The Lord shall give strength to his people; The Lord shall give his people the blessing of peace.
Psalm 29:11

This is not what we had expected! This is not the picture we could ever have imagined on this Sunday, in this season. No waving palms, no shoulder-to-shoulder procession, no hosannas lifted onto the morning breeze. Only an empty church, once again, with all our faithful friends at home, where they need to be, dwelling in respectful self-exile for the sake of others and for themselves.

But, still, we are here, we few, still gifted with breath and hope, even as we feel the spirit of our absent family all around us. We are here to give praise and thanks to God, to gather as community though we are sundered and apart; we are called on to remember the afflicted and to honor the courageous, and to mourn for those who have died.

In this simple service of Morning Prayer, we seek to give voice to our soul's yearning. We reach out to God, perhaps as we never have before in our collective lives. We search for answers to dreadful questions. We look for solace in the face of fear, for strength and direction in the midst of uncertainty. By way of scripture and canticle, collect and suffrage, we ask the Lord to probe our hearts, and so to find us once more a people ready to live God's love and to do God's will. Most of all, I think, we ask of God the gift of trust.

Trust doesn't come naturally to us, let's face it. The popular notion is that trust must be earned. And although we don't like to admit it, this expectation applies also to God! Show us, Lord, we're apt to say, that you love us. Show that you care both about our general needs and our specific sorrows. We know, of course, that you did not will or cause this deadly pandemic. We are not being punished for our sins, we know that. And yet what are you doing to help us get through it? Where is the road ahead, the road home, the road to the future? Why should we rely on you, as hospital hallways bulge with beds, and bodies pile up across the globe? Trust must be earned, after all; so, what have you done recently to give us confidence? Where are you now when we need you most?

And if you somehow think that clergy are immune from these kinds of divine accusations, please think again! There have been times, in fact, just in the last two weeks, when I've felt such a emptiness, such a loneliness, such a helplessness. I realize, of course, that I'm not alone. Oh, I know that God is there, but I can't quite recall the exact spot! I've started greeting others, almost casually, with Stay Safe and Be Well; yet I'm not actually sure how we can fulfill either of those goals emotionally or spiritually not without God to support and guide us, not without the certainty of God's presence, not without trust.

In his remarks last week to clergy and lay leaders in the Diocese, Bishop Sutton quoted the French Catholic writer Pierre Teilhard de Chardin who speaks at one point directly to this character of trust to the need for it and to the absence of it in all our fearfulness and doubt. For de Chardin, however, our difficulty is not merely with trust but with patience. His words have an eerily current cast to them, although they were written many decades ago. ...

Above all, he says, 'trust in the slow work of God. We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay. We should like to skip the intermediate stages. We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new. And yet it is the law of all progress that it is made

by passing through some stages of instability and that it may take a very long time. ... Only God can say what that new spirit gradually forming within you will be. Give Our Lord, then, the benefit of believing that his hand is leading you and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.'

Two phrases jumped out at me in this passage: the 'slow work of God' and the 'benefit of believing. If we think about it, each of us has experienced some of God's slow work in our lives, haven't we? We've known, for instance, the gradual, stage-by-stage journey of healing from hurt or loss. We've seen our children grow and struggle over (perhaps) many troubled years to reach their full sense of themselves and of their place in the world. And so each time these successes occurred, if we were honest with ourselves, we gave God the benefit of believing, for each time we knew that God had had a hand in all of it; the triumph was not ours alone. It's true, there was great and lingering anxiety attached to it, and it didn't happen in an instant. Still, our gratitude, even our joy, was made somehow sweeter and more complete by having arrived over hard roads in hard times, over long years.

This, I submit, is what we are all about right now. Nothing in our prayers or songs or sacred texts today (or on any day of worship) should feel at all strange or unrelated to our lives in this moment. For they speak of the slow work of God; and so they invite us to give that work and that Creator the benefit of believing the patient indulgence, if you will, borne out of the memory of all that God has done for us and our trust in all that God will continue to do. We just have no reason to believe otherwise. Try as I might, I cannot think of one.

So, as we walk with Christ and with each other during these desperate days, and as we enter the journey we call Holy Week, let us carry with us, as our Lord did, the world's suffering and the world's hope. Even if it's only in the dutiful confines of our own home, let each of us in our turn take some part in the slow work of God. Let each of us be, by grace (as the Psalmist foretold) a strength to our people. Let each of us be a blessing of peace. Amen.

Blessings,
Fr. Gordon +