

Remember Me

Today is Reign of Christ Sunday and, according to the lectionary that we are following, today's text is about the Crucifixion. Does that make sense to you – the reign of Christ on the cross? Don't you think we need more powerful images, like the king of kings and the lord of lords for the Reign of Christ? How could Christ reign on the cross? What could Jesus do on the cross? Can you still follow a leader who become powerless and can't do anything for you? Today we are challenged to examine our own images of Christ's reign. Our Christ is neither in a palace nor in a temple, but the place of the skull, Golgotha, a small rise outside of the gates of Jerusalem. He is crucified there with two criminals, one on his right and one on his left.

We don't like to see the scene, this crucifixion, just before Advent, do we? It seems strange to talk about the Crucifixion when Advent and Christmas are just ahead. However, I think there is a message for us to visit Golgotha, the Skull, before we visit the manger, because we can form a better understanding of why Jesus came to us if we start where he ends.

If I had a time machine and could choose when and where I would go, I'd like to meet Jesus. I'd love to be with him, to listen to him, to watch what he is doing, walk with him wherever he goes, and make friends with the people around him. But, to be honest with you, I am not sure if I could stand before his cross. To be more exact, I wouldn't want to see his pain, suffering and death.

I can understand why most of his followers disappeared when he was crucified, because his suffering was just too awful for them to witness. Some followers might have been disappointed by a leader who ended up so vulnerable, so different from the warrior messiah they had hoped for. Some might have felt terribly ashamed because they could not protect him. For whatever reason, most of the followers of Jesus hid themselves and did not see that notorious execution.

So, I admire those who remained with Jesus to keep watch through all of his suffering. The Gospel of Mark describes those who were present to the end of Jesus' death. "There were women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem."

We don't know exactly why it was mostly women who remained. But we do know that most women of that era stoically bore their own pain and suffering, subordinate to men in a patriarchal society. While the male followers of Jesus fought, and then fled, the women, with their own recollections of pain and helplessness, stayed. Maybe their hurt, pain and love led them to simply be with Jesus while he was suffering.

I still vividly remember my mother's tears streaming down her face when she was watching a movie about Jesus' crucifixion. I don't remember the details of the movie, because I was too little, but I still remember that there was a connection between Jesus' suffering and my mother's, whether she could understand his suffering because of her pain, or she felt understood because of his suffering.

As I grew up, I have realized that I also have as much hurt and pain as my mother, but it has taken years and years to learn how to deal with them. I used to avoid facing my own pain and I avoided facing other's pain as well. So whenever I heard about the Crucifixion, I didn't really get it. But now I know that his cross is my story, and that my pain is a part of his suffering.

Whether we like it or not, all of us are invited to look directly at two crosses today: one is for Jesus, and the other is for each one of us. At some point in our lives, we know that we were given our own cross. I think that cross is never far away; it can be something that you are responsible for, something you have to carry or face every day in your life, something that you can't deny and do not wish to embrace. It can be a burden but it can also be a blessing.

Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Here Jesus points out our own cross. He wants us to take up not his cross but ours, to admit our burden and our pain and to follow him. We can't say that we are following Jesus, just because we love his cross, because we can't even understand his cross unless we understand our cross first. We all have a cross, but not all of us want to recognize it, and not all of us want to take it up even though we've already experienced it, like the two people who were hanged there with Jesus.

One of the other crucified men kept deriding Jesus and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" Does his argument make sense to you? He may sound persuasive, but his words are in vain because he denies both his cross and the cross of Jesus; to him the crucified Jesus can't be the triumphant Messiah.

The other person is different. He says "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He accepts both the cross of Christ and his own cross. All he needs to know is the fact that he is crucified with Jesus. And what he asks of Jesus is just to be remembered. Can you hear what he is really trying to say to Jesus? I think he means, "I will remember you, Jesus, because you are the one who truly understands my pain." He is not alone and he knows that he will not be alone in dying and even after death.

When we face challenges in our lives, we are invited to look at both our cross and the cross on which Jesus was crucified. We make a choice between denial and acceptance; we can be like the first crucified man who focuses only on getting away from the cross: 'why me', 'why now', 'do something for me right now'; we can also be like the second person who felt the presence of Christ in the midst of his pain. It's your choice whether you say "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" or "Remember me".