

“Communion”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
April 17th, 2014
Maundy Thursday

Mark 14:1-11; Luke 22:7-30; John 18:1-14, 19-24;
Luke 18:15-18, 25-27; John 18:28-40; John 19:1-16; Psalm 22

³³ Pilate went back into the palace. He summoned Jesus and asked,
“Are you the king of the Jews?”

³⁴ Jesus answered,

“Do you say this on your own or have others spoken to you about me?”

John 18:33-34

Let us pray... O God,
Teach us how to be in communion with you – to look and see, to listen and
hear the grace of how you are still active in our world.

Amen

Recent films about the Bible have been very disappointing to me
with their superficial treatment of the Biblical narratives
and lots of ‘computer generated images’ of unnecessary violence
used like hot sauce to cover a bland recipe or cooking mistakes.

However, there are some films that would do justice to the Gospel
even though they weren’t Biblical.

An excellent example is one of the greatest movies of all time –
“Spartacus”.

The story of “Spartacus” is about a slave revolt that turned into a revolution.
and threatened to topple Rome itself.

A slave army, led by the gladiator Spartacus directly opposed the military might
of the Roman army.

After many victories, the slaves were strategically surrounded and defeated,
their army was crushed and six thousand prisoners were crucified
along the Appian Way, the ancient highway that led to Rome.

There are some parallels with the story of Christ
besides the terrible scenes of crucifixion.

Every time I hear the story of Jesus before the Roman Governor Pilate,
a particular from “Spartacus” what that meeting would have been like.

Many films depict a climactic encounter, where the hero must face the archvillain
in the inner sanctum of power.

In this case, Varinia, the wife of Spartacus had been taken captive
by the Roman general, Crassus, and brought to his palace to be his mistress.

In his desire to have what Spartacus had, Crassus tried in vain to win over Varinia,
first, by offering her riches – then by threatening her newborn child.

Despite her powerlessness in this situation, she has the conviction of who she is
and who she loves.

Willard, p.2

Like Pilate asking Jesus, if he was a king,

Crassus – played by Sir Lawrence Olivier, asked if Spartacus was a god,
but Varinia like Jesus, deflects every question and stands firm.

She exposes Crassus for his envy and points out that he can only take things,
yet his emptiness remains.

Crassus responds by hardening his heart to be more determined
to destroy even the legend of Spartacus.

However, when Pilate is confronted with his moral ambiguity,
he asks – to his credit, ‘What is truth?’

From the very beginning of Jesus’ life, he was in conflict with this world –
first, born in a stable where he was exposed to the elements;
then, his family had to flee from a mad king’s paranoia;
when he grew up, he was tempted by cosmic evil in the wilderness;
and as an adult, he was constantly in conflict with religious authorities.
Yet, like gold in a refining fire, the struggles only brought out the best in Jesus –
always, always, always the best.

When Pilate realizes he is faced with something more complex than he
is able to understand and manage, he scrambles to free Jesus
from what - by then, had become inevitable...

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran minister
who worked against the Nazis in Germany during World War II,
even participating in a plot to assassinate Hitler.

He was caught and sent to a concentration camp.

His letters to his family & friends were collected and
they have become a Christian spiritual classic,
inspiring Martin Luther King and many others.

He was executed shortly before the end of the war
and it was said about him that his last ‘congregation’
were those who were there to see him die.

The SS doctor on hand said that Bonhoeffer was ‘devout... brave and composed’
and that he had never seen anyone go to his death
‘so entirely submissive to the will of God’.

<http://www.ushmm.org/information/exhibitions/online-features/special-focus/dietrich-bonhoeffer/resistance-and-execution>

A kind of communion had taken place between Bonhoeffer and his executioners
as it did between Jesus and Pilate.

Whether the SS doctor or Pilate understood or not, we can only speculate,
but they realized they were in the presence of something
that didn’t break down before them and they couldn’t control...

Willard, p.3

As fragile human beings we break down –

whether by age or disease, misuse or neglect, pain or disappointment,
our bodies and minds break down.

But Jesus of Nazareth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King,
and perhaps the legendary Spartacus & Varinia,

were in touch with that which was bigger than themselves –
a hope born of the Spirit that even offered love to one's enemies
without compromising themselves in the process.

Tonight, let us listen again to those familiar stories of long ago about Christ
and hear what they have to say to each us, now in our time...

Amen

Inspired by John 18:33-38

THEN, PILATE ENTERED THE PRAETORIUM
AND HE SUMMONED JESUS AND SAID TO HIM,
“SO, YOU ARE ‘THE KING OF THE JEWS’.

JESUS ANSWERED HIM,
“DO YOU SAY THIS AS YOUR OWN OPINION,
OR BY WHAT OTHERS HAVE SAID TO YOU ABOUT ME?”

PILATE ANSWERED HIM,
“AM I NOT A JEW?
YOUR PEOPLE –AND THE HIGH PRIESTS
HAVE HANDED YOU OVER TO ME!
WHAT DID YOU DO?”

JESUS ANSWERED,
“MY ‘KINGDOM’ IS NOT OF THIS WORLD –
IF IT WAS OF THIS WORLD, MY SERVANTS WOULD
PROTEST,
SO THAT I WOULD NOT BE HANDED OVER BY THE JUDEANS.
BUT AT PRESENT,
MY ‘KINGDOM’ IS NOT FROM HERE.”

THEN, PILATE SAID TO HIM,
“SO, YOU ARE A KING?”

JESUS ANSWERED HIM,
“YOU SAY I AM A KING. I WAS BORN FOR THIS REASON
AND FOR THIS REASON I HAVE COME INTO THE WORLD:
TO PROCLAIM THE TRUTH.
ALL WHO ARE TRUTH-FUL UNDERSTAND WHAT I SAY.”

PILATE SAID TO HIM,
“WHAT IS TRUTH?”

John 18:33-38

33 Pilate went back into the palace. He summoned Jesus and asked,

“Are you the king of the Jews?”

34 Jesus answered,

“Do you say this on your own or have others spoken to you about me?”

35 Pilate responded,

“I’m not a Jew, am I?

Your nation and its chief priests handed you over to me.

What have you done?”

36 Jesus replied,

“My kingdom doesn’t originate from this world.

If it did, my guards would fight

so that I wouldn’t have been arrested by the Jewish leaders.

My kingdom isn’t from here.”

37 “So you are a king?” Pilate said.

Jesus answered,

“You say that I am a king.

I was born and came into the world for this reason:

to testify to the truth.

Whoever accepts the truth listens to my voice.”

38 “What is truth?” Pilate asked.